

LEST THE ROCKS CRY OUT:
EQUIPPING WOMEN TO MOVE FROM SILENCE TO
AUTHORITATIVE SPEECH

By

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Abstract

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Given the importance of verbal communication throughout the Bible, it is striking to realize that in modern America women are still routinely prohibited from speaking in the corporate worship gatherings of the Churches of Christ. Based on a literal interpretation of a few scriptures, most Churches of Christ continue to severely limit the participation of women. However, there is a movement within the ecumenical branch of the Churches of Christ to change patriarchal traditions, opening the door to the full and equal participation of women in the church and in the life of faith. While many people are working to bring moral, intellectual and spiritual conversion in this area, change happens slowly. Church leaders discuss women for years on end while women are kept waiting. The line of restriction may be pushed back but it is not erased and women are expected to be patient and thankful for any small improvements.

In this project I assess the spiritual needs of women in changing churches. The first area of focus explores the process that women go through when coming out of a patriarchal church culture into a feminist awareness. The second area of focus is a biblical theology of language, demonstrating the necessity of the human voice and language in all of Christian life. The third area focuses specifically on women of color who are gifted for ministry within the Churches of Christ, in an effort to better support women who are facing interlocking systems of oppression. The paper includes a description of the ministry project and an analysis of ministry competencies. It concludes with strategies for change and a theological reflection about living faithfully in the midst of transition.

Dedication

To Aidan, Owen, Della, Ike and Marjorie. Sharing life with you is my greatest joy. The opportunity to walk alongside you, to discover the world through your eyes, sparks in me a sacred imagination. I believe that God's promises of the kingdom to come will be realized in your precious lives, and I trust that the One who holds me, will also hold you securely in arms more strong and everlasting than mine.

Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. And we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history. Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

—Rev. Martin Luther King

He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up.

—Mark 5:41-42a

Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind – even if your voice shakes.

—Maggie Kuhn

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I want to express my sincerest appreciation to my husband Matt Henegar who works tirelessly to take care of me and our five precious children. Thank you to my parents Tom and Sheila Bost who are my biggest fans and support me with blind affection; to my sister Dr. Emily Bost-Baxter who is my most trusted confidant, think tank and support system; and to my brothers Luke and Paul Bost and their sweet families. Thank you to the incredible Claudine Whyte who has given me the gift of loving my children as her own; and to my amazing friends who will, in Brene Brown's words, "help me move a body," or support me through a doctoral program, whichever comes first – Allison Isbell, Melanie Murphy, Cari Pattison, Sharon Parson, Kate Eicher, and Karen Kelly, to risk naming a few! Plus my oldest friends, Julie McGoldrick and Dr. Elisa Warford, whose brilliant presence in my life informs the person I am today. Finally I'm deeply grateful to the people of the Culver Palms Church of Christ who raised me and love me still today.

And to Jesus, who I met in the middle of a hot, sunny day sitting by a well in Samaria. He clearly knew me—the good, the bad and the ugly – but that didn't affect how he treated me. We talked theology and he assumed I was smart enough to understand. He could tell I was thirsty and he promised me water from a well that will never run dry. It hasn't. The well has been filled with living water to this very day. Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN CALLED TO SPEAK

I graduated from college in the spring of 1992. I had grown up in an affluent home with parents who believed strongly in education, thus, when I finished my bachelor's degree the question was not whether I would go to graduate school but what I would study and where. I had spent four years at Pepperdine University, a liberal arts college in Malibu, California, affiliated with my own religious tradition, the Churches of Christ. I had learned a lot and grown in many ways, but I had started and ended college without any sense of professional direction. The only career that interested me was teaching, but I could never identify a subject or age level that matched my interests or skills. I finally settled on a graduate program in speech pathology. My mother had studied speech pathology and I figured it could be a good fit for me as well since I loved languages and had studied voice for many years.

As I began leveling classes in preparation for the master's degree, a curious thing began happening in my mind and heart. The classes were interesting, there was no doubt about that, but I found myself jealous of my friends who were going to seminary. I had only heard the term "seminary" a few times but I was coming to understand that a seminary was a place where people studied ministry and the Bible and theology. The idea fascinated me. The thought that there were institutions that existed to provide graduate education for men and women who wanted to study these subjects was captivating. The women I knew were beginning seminary programs in Christian counseling. While the counseling programs did not sound exciting to me, the scripture, church history and

theology classes were enthralling. They also sounded a bit indulgent. Surely I couldn't go to graduate school and study the Bible! Isn't that what you're supposed to do on Sundays at church? I assumed that whatever these schools were doing, they weren't doing it for me.

But the thoughts wouldn't leave my head. The more I thought about it the more I realized that, contrary to my previous assumptions, I did have a very specific area of academic interest. I had taken four religion classes at Pepperdine and they had been my favorite classes in my college curriculum. And I did have some pretty clear vocational inclinations. Every summer during college I worked as a counselor at a Christian camp and when the camp ended I always wished that I could just be a Christian camp counselor forever. When I was a Resident Assistant my junior year of college I loved every minute of it, unlike the majority of my coworkers. The opportunity to be a mentor and friend in the lives of younger students in a Christian college environment was meaningful and fun. The summer after my senior year I was the youth ministry intern for my home church. When the summer ended I was sad—I wished I could be a ministry intern forever, but it never crossed my mind that this internship might open the door to ministry as a profession. I had never considered that any of this indicated an inclination toward professional ministry, until I found myself studying speech pathology and daydreaming about seminary.

I finally found the courage to talk to my parents about this seminary idea. To my surprise, they were quite encouraging. They weren't sure what a woman would do with a seminary degree, but they believed in education so they told me they would support me if I wanted to go that direction. They also probably believed I would marry someone who

would take care of my financial needs until I quit working and had kids, so their concerns about job prospects, or the lack thereof, were minimal. In the middle of some very practical conversations about education and careers and plans, there was a moment of inspiration that I will always remember. Early one morning I was drinking my coffee in my parents' home. My mother was the only one who was awake with me and I was deliberating aloud about whether or not I should leave the speech pathology program and go to seminary. My mother moved to where I was sitting, grabbed both of my hands, looked into my eyes and said, "Amy, if this is what God has put in your heart, this is what you have to do! Don't let anyone convince you otherwise." I had never, in my entire life, heard my mother speak in this way. We were a very religious family who read the Bible and prayed regularly. We went to church and volunteered and did all the things a good Christian family should do. But we never talked about the Holy Spirit leading us or about God calling us. And we certainly didn't talk about God putting things in our hearts. But my mother did. That morning, over coffee, at her kitchen table. And I listened.

In the fall of 1993 I enrolled in the M.Div. program at Fuller Theological Seminary, a non-denominational Christian seminary in Pasadena, California. I had no idea what I was going to do with this hefty degree, but I loved school in a way I never had before. I knew exactly one woman who was employed as a minister but with a very small circle of critical support I embarked on an unknown path, following something that just might have been a call from God.

Everyone's story happens within a context and my context is the Churches of Christ. Living in Los Angeles, I did not have many friends who were part of the small Bible-belt denomination that had been my religious home for my entire life. While our

numbers were relatively small, the heritage was strong. My parents had both grown up in the Churches of Christ in Oklahoma and Texas, moving to California two years before I was born. The Churches of Christ were the only religious community I had known throughout my childhood and adolescence. My parents were leaders in our congregation and my aunt and uncle were missionaries. My faith was formed in this religious context, as was my desire to practice ministry.

The Churches of Christ began during the Second Great Awakening. Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) are generally recognized as the founders of the American Restoration Movement and were the earliest leaders in what has also come to be known as the Stone-Campbell tradition. The group met for worship for the first time on January 1, 1832, in Lexington, Kentucky. Their goal was to restore Christian unity by abolishing creeds and returning to the principles of the early church as described in the New Testament. They were motivated by a desire for Christian unity and hoped that this could be achieved by rejecting human opinions, specifically in the form of creeds and confessions, and holding only to the specific teachings found in scripture. Scripture, therefore, was held in highest regard as they sought to restore New Testament principles, worship and practices. The individualism characteristic of the American frontier was evident in their emphasis on “the priesthood of all believers”—the lay person’s ability to read and interpret scripture without the assistance of clergy or a seminary education. Their desire for simplicity is seen in the fact that they called

themselves “Christians” or “Disciples of Christ,” and referred to their fellowship as the “Christian Church” and “Churches of Christ.”¹

Churches grew throughout the following decades but the young fellowship quickly found itself divided, along with the rest of the country, over the subject of slavery. While most churches adopted the prevalent attitude of the areas in which they lived, southern churches favoring slavery and northern churches opposing it, there was also a strong emphasis on the importance of maintaining unity among believers. It is because of this desire for unity, as well as the fact that many of the movement’s leaders were committed to anti-war pacifism, that most churches were silent on the issue of slavery.² When the Civil War came, they fought on both sides. The movement that had begun to bring unity became horribly divided, even to the point of death. While the call to unity continued after the war, deep divisions remained.

By 1906 the U.S. Religious Census recognized two groups, the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ. The Disciples of Christ tended to value unity over the restoration of the New Testament church. The Churches of Christ tended to oppose innovation, pursuing the ideal of restoring the New Testament church, even at the expense of unity. Disciples believed that practices not specifically forbidden in scripture could be seen as acceptable, while Churches of Christ believed that practices not present in the New Testament should be understood to be prohibited. The two most pressing issues of the day included the formation of missionary societies and the use of instrumental music in worship. Both of these practices were seen as not specifically

¹ Disciples of Christ Historical Society, “A Brief History of the Stone-Campbell Tradition,” <https://www.discipleshistory.org/history/brief-history-stone-campbell-tradition> (accessed January 18, 2018).

² Ibid.

authorized by the New Testament but the Disciples felt that they were acceptable on the basis of Christian liberty. Other dividing issues included the training and role of clergy, ecumenism, and to a lesser extent at this point, the role of women in the church.

There are three groups that claim the Stone Campbell heritage today: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ. The original leaders of the movement were not intending to form a new denomination. On the contrary they strongly rejected the idea that churches should submit to any sort of organizational structure beyond the local congregation. The more conservative two groups still hold to this ideal maintaining their non-denominational status, while the Disciples of Christ have embraced their identity as a Christian denomination. Still, the Restoration Movement heritage is seen in all three groups in the following values: the priesthood of all believers, the practices of weekly communion and baptism by immersion, and congregational autonomy.

When I graduated from Fuller in the summer of 1996 I looked for a ministry position in a local Church of Christ but there were no churches wanting to hire a woman. I might have been able to find a position somewhere in the country in youth, children's or women's ministry, but I needed to stay in Southern California while my husband finished law school. At this point very few churches were hiring or appointing women to a role with the title "minister." The Disciples of Christ had been ordaining women to be pastors since the 1920s, but Church of Christ congregations still interpreted scripture to forbid women from speaking and holding positions of authority in the church. It is not surprising that Churches of Christ, the branch of the Stone-Campbell Movement that held most tightly to the literal interpretation of scripture, would resist a move toward women

ministers. As historian Kathy Pulley explains, “One of the reasons for this lack of public authoritative role for women was the strong opposition expressed by such leaders as David Lipscomb, who argued in the *Gospel Advocate* that ‘to disobey Paul’s command on silence would lead women to eternal death.’”³ However in the 1960s and ’70s hermeneutical paradigms began to change. Church leaders began to read the Bible through a more holistic lens, and the shifts in culture stimulated important conversations in the church regarding “the role of women.” In 1987 the Brookline Church of Christ in Massachusetts was the first church to hire a woman to share the preaching responsibilities. In 1989 they issued a statement “affirming the importance of women’s public involvement in all aspects of the church’s ministries.”⁴

Unable to find a ministry position, I filled my time doing odd jobs until I discovered hospital chaplaincy. I was thrilled to find chaplaincy because it presented an opportunity for important and meaningful ministry, without any limitations on the basis of gender. I participated in a year-long residency as a hospital chaplain then moved forward to pursue Board Certification with the Association of Professional Chaplains. As part of the certification process I needed to be ordained and endorsed by an established denomination. Given the long history in the Stone-Campbell movement of emphasizing the priesthood of all believers and opposing any sort of clerical system,⁵ the language of “ordination” is hardly used in the Churches of Christ. However the priesthood of all believers doctrine does open the door for the ordination of any believer. As Alexander

³ Douglas A. Foster, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 779.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 522.

Campbell himself explained, any Christian “may of right preach, baptize, and dispense the supper, as well as pray for all men when circumstances demand it.”⁶ On this basis I went to the elders of my local congregation and they “ordained” me for ministry on behalf of the Churches of Christ, and endorsed my good standing as a member and minister representing the Churches of Christ. I was able to complete the certification process but I found myself in an odd position. As a hospital chaplain I was seen as a representative of the Churches of Christ. But I didn’t know any other hospital chaplains from the Churches of Christ. I also didn’t know any other women ministers from the Churches of Christ. I loved my job but I felt like a lone ranger, representing a group of people who, on the one hand knew and loved me, but on the other hand didn’t know what to do with me.

I loved chaplaincy, enjoyed my colleagues and was fascinated by the connection between medicine and faith, but I continued to feel alone in my vocation. Every chaplain I knew had ties to a faith tradition to whom they were accountable and from whom they received support. But I continued to feel like I was floating in space, a self-appointed representative of a church that didn’t recognize me. I longed for colleagues. I longed for friends who were walking a similar journey. I longed to know women, specifically, whom God had called to do the types of things I believed God was calling me to do. But I knew no one.

In 1999 my husband and I moved to New York City and became a part of the Manhattan Church of Christ. Long before we arrived this congregation began discussing the scriptures that appear to restrict the participation of women, and by the time we

⁶ Ibid., 524.

arrived they were ready to depart from the traditional limitations placed on women in Churches of Christ and significantly change their practices.⁷ In 2001 they hired me to be their Minister to Children and Families. I was excited about the opportunity to do ministry in the context of a local church and I was thrilled to be part of a ministry staff for a church that believed in the full equality of women. But I still longed to know other women ministers. I had so much in common with my male colleagues, but my gender made us different. I desperately wanted to share my vocational journey with someone like me who was doing something in a similar context.

While I was busy with seminary, chaplaincy and moving to New York, there was another woman who was dreaming dreams similar to mine. D’Esta Love was the Dean of Students at Pepperdine University. Although D’Esta’s professional life had been in Christian higher education, she had a heart for pastoral ministry. In addition to her day job, she took graduate classes and over time she completed an M.Div. When I was a freshman at Pepperdine, D’Esta taught my “Bible as Literature” Freshman Seminar. She was the first Church of Christ woman I ever heard preach.

Since the Churches of Christ do not have a national headquarters, annual lectureships at Church of Christ colleges and universities serve a similar function to an annual convention. Through the years they have shaped our theological identity, providing space for fellowship and a venue for discussion.⁸ The Pepperdine Bible

⁷ Thomas L. Robinson and Amy Bost Henegar. “Women Fully Using Their Gifts: The Journey of the Manhattan Church of Christ.” *Leaven* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2012), <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss2/7>, 78-80.

⁸ D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), 159.

Lectures are held every year in late April or early May on the campus in Malibu, California.

In 1997 D’Esta organized an evening meeting for women in ministry as part of the Pepperdine Bible Lectures. She didn’t know if anyone would come but many women did. As the women told their stories and shared their ministries, we quickly realized that very few of these women were employed by churches. Most of them had started ministries reaching out to other women from their places of pain. From alcoholism to abusive marriages to situations of grief and loss, the women had been moved to share the healing message of the gospel with other women, completely outside of the church structure.⁹ Their testimonies were beautiful stories from women who were answering God’s call on their lives by putting their hearts and souls into the work of spiritual healing. They were living out the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, finding their life’s work, their purpose, their vocation, in their ministries.

While I found these early meetings to be fascinating and beautiful, I also found them to be frustrating. As a young woman, a recent seminary graduate, I wanted to know women who were preparing and training and seeking to become ministers in churches—to preach and teach and lead in the context of the local church. The call for “Women in Ministry” to come together cast a very wide net, especially in a tradition that lived and breathed the priesthood of all believers. Of course all Christian women are called by God to be ministers in one way or another but I wanted to know women who were trying to live out a *vocational* calling to ministry in a *professional* way. I believed they were out there but I only knew a couple. Reluctantly, I began to use the phrase “professional

⁹ This is what women have done time and time again, and are still doing today — answering God’s call to ministry by creating their own space, bypassing institutional permission or invitation.

ministry” in order to communicate my desire *to connect Church of Christ women with theological training who are seeking to engage in church work on a professional level.*

In 1999 I created an email list. It began as a very short list, less than ten women, but they all had a similar professional awareness and identity. Over the next few years the list grew. By 2005 the list included close to 90 women. Of those, approximately half were employed by churches or universities. The rest of the list was either students or women with theological training who were working in a volunteer ministry capacity. Most of the women on the list were comfortable wearing the title “minister” and felt vocationally drawn to professional ministry. The email list created a safe online space where women were able to have important conversations about the challenges of being a female minister. The discussions ranged from “what do you wear when you perform a wedding?” to “how should I tell the elders I want to preach?” to “why don’t my male colleagues ever include me in their lunch plans?” It was from this email list that a community was born. We called ourselves the Women in Ministry Network.

We continued to meet annually at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures but we also began to have our own conferences. The first Women in Ministry Conference took place at Pepperdine University in April of 2005. We met every year from 2005 to 2010 in different locations with different leadership teams. The conferences were a breath of fresh air for all who attended them. Women consistently spoke of feeling alone in their ministry environments and feeling relieved to spend time with others doing the same kind of work in similar contexts. In 2013 the email list was ended and a private Facebook group was created. As I write this, the group has over 250 members and more women are added every week. And while the numbers are larger and Facebook’s interface is much

more accessible, the questions and discussions are quite similar to the ones from ten years ago. Women are being called by God into roles of pastoral leadership. They are listening and studying and praying, preparing themselves to lead and teach the people of God in the context of the local church. Some have friends who are doing the same thing. A few have female mentors. Many do not have either. According to C.S. Lewis, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’” The most important thing the Women in Ministry Network has done over the last fifteen years is foster friendships among women ministers in the Churches of Christ.¹⁰

A lot has changed since I graduated from seminary twenty years ago.

Conversations that were just beginning at that time have continued and grown, and important changes have been made in many churches. Theological psychologist Dr.

Richard Beck explains the current state of the Churches of Christ in the following way:

There are two kinds of Churches of Christ. Some people call these “liberal/progressive” or “conservative/traditional” Churches of Christ. This split isn’t formal, but it’s widely recognized within the movement. However, I don’t like these labels as they aren’t very descriptive. Here are the labels I prefer. There are ecumenical Churches of Christ and there are sectarian Churches of Christ. The ecumenical Churches of Christ have a sense of church history and about where they fit within that history. Consequently, ecumenical Churches of Christ see themselves as just one part of the church universal and, thus, extend the right hand of fellowship to other Christian communities. By contrast, sectarian Churches of Christ don’t have a sense of church history and, thus, feel that they are a faithful replication of the first century church... As such, sectarian Churches of Christ feel that they are the true and only apostolic church. All other churches are forms of heresy and disobedience, a willful refusal to worship according to the New Testament pattern.¹¹

¹⁰ See Appendix B for Community of Women Ministers timeline.

¹¹ Richard Beck, “Four Reasons Why I’m Church of Christ,” *Experimental Theology* (blog), October 11, 2011, <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2011/10/four-reasons-why-im-church-of-christ.html> (accessed January 18, 2018).

He goes on to explain that he places a lot of hope in the ecumenical Churches of Christ. While we certainly have our problems, Dr. Beck finds “the ecumenical Churches of Christ to be one of the best places to be within contemporary Christianity.”¹² His assessment of the ecumenical Churches of Christ resonates with me. My Doctor of Ministry project and research is directed toward the ecumenical branch of the family tree. These are the people I know. These are the churches that have formed me. They have taught me about grace and about the steadfast love of the Lord. I hope my work will be able to inform the conversations that are happening in these loving, grace-filled churches.

While the sectarian-ecumenical tension has been present since the early days of the Stone-Campbell movement,¹³ one of the major issues dividing churches today has to do with a scriptural theology of gender and a Biblical understanding of women. Congregations that are moving in the direction of ecumenism are invariably reconsidering their views regarding gender roles, while sectarian congregations are firmly rooted in traditional roles and assumptions regarding women. As the wider culture becomes increasingly aware of the discrimination, sexual harassment and assault women face in all segments of society, churches are also growing in awareness. While some churches are responding defensively and refusing to engage in self-examination, others are courageously examining their theology and practices. There are many leaders who realize that the church has been complicit in the oppression of women. They realize that

¹² His reasons are outlined in the blog post referenced above and are well worth reading.

¹³ This is the same tension between restoration and unity which led to the split from the Disciples in the early 1900s.

we are at a critical point in history and are working to make significant changes to reverse destructive patterns.¹⁴

A recent informal tally revealed that there are currently more than 300 women studying scripture, ministry and theology at the undergraduate or graduate level in Church of Christ related academic institutions.¹⁵ These women are investing their time and money in preparation for lives of ministry and service to the church. While the numbers of women preparing for ministry has increased, and continues to increase, the contrast between the number of women in school and women in congregational ministry is stark. We can count on one hand the number of women who currently hold professional level positions that include preaching and teaching adults in Churches of Christ. There are many more women serving churches as ministers to children, youth or women; these are limited in their roles and do not have much opportunity for professional growth or advancement.

Our colleges and universities are preparing women to serve as pastors and preachers, but these positions are not available in the Churches of Christ. Ultimately these women are being educated and trained to serve somewhere else. Some are leaving the Churches of Christ to become ordained pastors of other denominations. Some are finding ministry positions in para-church organizations. Some are serving as spiritual directors, or as chaplains in the military, prisons, hospitals and schools. Some are writing and speaking, even cultivating online “congregations” using the tools of modern

¹⁴ See Carolyn Curtis James’s book *Half the Church*—addressed to conservative Christians regarding the oppression of women and the church’s responsibility to address it.

¹⁵ This is an informal count determined by women in the Community of Women Ministers Facebook group. Representatives of the various institutions reported the number of women from their specific institution.

technology. Women who train for ministry and graduate from our colleges and universities are serving God in many ways, doing wonderful work with the excellent educations they have received, but they are not preaching in our local churches. We might hear their voices if we listen carefully and in the right places, but we will not hear them in our pulpits.

Although the number of churches reconsidering their views on women is growing, changes continue to be slow in coming. Congregational leaders deliberate, debate, and discuss women for months, often years, on end. All the while, women continue to attend church and wonder what the outcome will be. Will they be invited to speak? Will they be permitted to pray? Will they be allowed to participate in meetings, to share their thoughts and opinions? Will they be encouraged to use their gifts to serve the church? Their concerns are not only for themselves but also for their daughters. They are painfully aware of the pressures that girls face in today's world, pressures that lead so many girls to eating disorders and other self-destructive behaviors.¹⁶ They desperately want their daughters to find life-giving hope at church. They long for a church community who will make a spiritual and intellectual investment in their daughters, seeing them as equally beloved children of God who are fully gifted, called and responsible to be disciples of Jesus and God's agents for justice and peace in the world. As the conversations about what women are allowed to do in church continue little changes are made but often the desire to maintain unity and not lose members keeps leaders from making any significant

¹⁶ Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Helping You to Understand and Cope with Your Teenage Daughter* (London: Vermilion, 1996).

changes.¹⁷ While the line may be pushed back a bit, it is not erased and women are expected to be patient, to understand the delicate situation, and to be thankful for any small steps.

When I began my demonstration project my primary focus was on women pursuing professional ministry in the Churches of Christ. However, as I developed my project I broadened my focus to include women who are not in professional ministry but have likewise come to some measure of feminist awareness. These are the women who carry the weight of the volunteer ministry in our congregations while also carrying the burden of being female in churches that continue to be skeptical of women. There is no doubt that whole churches, men as well as women, are struggling, suffering even, but my specific focus in this work is the women who are working and waiting for change. Their burden is quite heavy. It is spiritually and emotionally taxing and they are growing weary. They know that the Bible calls every person to serve God to the best of his or her ability in or out of the church building and they have gained an awareness of the ways in which women are treated differently in the church. Thus they function in a space of cognitive dissonance. They have no desire to be the subject of repeated Bible studies and they are tired of being the object of debate. They long to be a part of a community that doesn't discriminate against any woman or girl because of her gender, but they try to be patient and believe that God is working all things together for good. They try to listen to the Holy Spirit and to serve God in the way God has called them to, but they continue to

¹⁷ This is reminiscent of our history regarding slavery — although many believed slavery was wrong, the desire to maintain unity in the church caused people to not speak up. See <https://www.discipleshistory.org/history/brief-history-stone-campbell-tradition>

be seen with suspicion. They feel, at the same time, convicted to follow their consciences and accused by their neighbors of causing conflict and undermining unity.

Most of these women consider leaving the Churches of Christ altogether and moving to a denomination that wrestled with “the women’s issue” a generation ago. But leaving is never as easy as it sounds. Some friends tell them to leave while others beg them to stay. The decision is often complicated by families, including children and teenagers, who will have to leave the church they love if their mother decides to leave. But even if there are no family considerations, the decision to leave a church is always heartbreaking. Leaving a beloved church family is akin to a divorce—letting go of dear friends and a shared spiritual history because the pain is just too great to stay. Thus, they don’t want to leave. They truly want to remain in their churches and continue to be part of the spiritual communities they have known and loved. This is why most women stay and work toward change.¹⁸ Sometimes that decision is filled with ambiguity. Other times it is a decision based on the conviction that God is calling them to stay and act on behalf of their sisters and their daughters, not to mention their brothers and sons. Either way, it’s not an easy road. They struggle to find the strength, compassion, patience, and spiritual reserve necessary to continue.

The fact that there are thousands of women considering leaving the Churches of Christ puts our fellowship at a critical place in history. If the ecumenical branch of the Churches of Christ is going to continue as a distinct religious tradition it is absolutely essential that women leaders have enough support to stay in their churches and be a part

¹⁸ Professor of Women’s Studies at New York Theological Seminary, Dr. Moody-Shepherd says she has found that most women stay in their patriarchal churches, even after gaining feminist awareness. Lecture at the Conference for Women Ministers, New York City, June 26, 2017.

of the change process. Their presence is essential because they are the ones who will be willing to step forward and take on new roles if and when those roles become available. If women with a feminist awareness leave, the process will never gain momentum.¹⁹ Churches will continue to deliberate, decade after decade, slowly losing members who are tired of waiting or tired of arguing, until eventually all momentum is lost.

Women must be supported enough that they are able to stay in their churches and continue to advocate for change. They must be equipped to step into new roles when they become available. They must be nourished and nurtured so that they don't burn out and become disillusioned, depressed or lose their faith altogether. Many women across the country sit in church on Sundays believing that no one sees what they see or feels what they feel. Feelings of isolation and loneliness drain their spirits. As difficult as it is to stay and work for change, the load is simply lighter when it is shared. Knowing that there are others who share their convictions, frustrations and longings helps to make the burden bearable. If women are going to stay in their churches and work for change, one of the things they need is a way to connect with other like-minded women.

Social media has been effective in bringing some of these women together. The Gal328 Forum is a Facebook group intended to be "a safe space to discuss issues of gender equity in the Churches of Christ and beyond." It started as a website and forum in the early 2000s and transitioned to a Facebook group in 2013. It includes men as well as women and functions as both an advocacy group and a support group for people who are seeking significant changes. The Community of Women Ministers Conversation Space is the Facebook group that I created in 2013. Our group is for women "with significant ties

¹⁹ Feminist awareness — see Carolyn Osiek's work explored in the next chapter. I use the terms feminist and egalitarian synonymously.

to the Churches of Christ who are called to ministry.” The focus is on supporting women who are trying to forge a new trail and venture into the world of professional ministry in a context from which women have always been excluded.

While these two groups provide much needed support to many women, many other women carrying the burden of change aren’t receiving much support. Social media provides an excellent venue for people to connect, but it certainly has its limitations. There is also a need for women to form physical relationships with those of a kindred spirit. Even the most technologically savvy person would agree that relationships work best when they can be anchored in flesh and blood interactions with human beings who have facial expressions and voices and audible laughs. More needs to be done to bring women together, physically and through the use of technology, to form friendships for support and encouragement.

In addition to finding human colleagues in the work of gender equality, women need to be continually reminded that God is with them as well. The conversations in churches tend to center around what women are biblically “allowed” to do. Thus the focus is on whether or not women have permission to preach, permission to pray, permission to take on specific leadership roles. The focus on permission paints a picture of God as either prohibiting or permitting. And even if the conclusion is that God will grant women permission to take on new roles, permission is not the same as affirmation. God’s permission is not the same as knowing that God is with you, behind you and going before you. The understanding that God will permit something is very different than believing that it is God’s desire, God’s joy, and part of God’s divine purpose.

Women who are carrying the burden of change in churches need to be lovingly reminded time and again of the importance of the work they are doing. They need space to connect with other people and to listen to God so that their spirits will be refreshed and they will be able to continue in the work of the gospel without losing heart. I believe that God has placed me in a position to be able to minister to these women. This conviction and passion has motivated this research and ministry project.

In the chapters that follow I will attempt to shed light on our current situation. First I will look at the process that women go through when coming to feminist awareness out of a patriarchal church culture. It is important to understand this process if we are to support the many women who are currently on this journey. Next I will look at the importance and role of language. Since women have been restricted from verbally participating in our worship assemblies, we must seek to understand the importance of the human voice, especially in the context of the Christian faith. We will develop a biblical theology of the spoken word then explore the implications for our lives as Christians, and specifically as women. My third area focuses specifically on women of color who are gifted and called to ministry within the Churches of Christ. Given that our religious tradition has been profoundly shaped by the racist theology of our ancestors, it is important for us to continually seek healing and justice for women of color who deal with multiple interlocking systems of oppression. Finally, I include a description and evaluation of my ministry project and an analysis of my own learning. The paper concludes with some strategies for change and a theological reflection about living faithfully in the midst of transition.

CHAPTER TWO: THE CRISIS OF AWARENESS

Girls in patriarchal churches grow up believing that there is a space in which women are permitted to speak and there is a space in which women are required to remain silent. Some girls question this structure from a young age. Many do not. For most girls it is simply their reality—it is all they have ever known. They know that a woman can be a high school teacher or a doctor or run for president of the United States. And they also know that a woman cannot preach in their church. They hold these two truths at the same time—one in each hand. From time to time they may wonder if there is something inconsistent about these realities, but they have been taught that “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom” and “God’s ways are not our ways.” So they trust the teaching that has been passed down to them and follow their mothers in a well-worn practice of keeping the peace.

Often girls in patriarchal churches are treated with more leniency than their mothers are. Some churches will allow young girls to speak in a worship service as part of a children’s program, only to revoke these privileges when the girl reaches puberty or adulthood. The result is that women believe on a conscious or subconscious level that there is something about a mature female body that is less Godly, less holy, and less appropriate for spiritual matters. While the physical differences between men and women are obvious, women receive a subtle but consistent message that because of their specific physical characteristics they are fundamentally flawed. Somehow, because of her gender, a woman’s words are not appropriate for public spaces. Even her prayers, spoken from a

female heart filled with faith, are not permitted to be shared with her spiritual sons, brothers and fathers.

When these girls grow up and learn that God doesn't discriminate on the basis of gender, they are thrown into a whirlwind of disorientation. Sister Carolyn Osiek, a Catholic theologian, wrote an autobiographically inspired book in 1986 called *Beyond Anger*. In this book she explores the process a woman goes through when she comes to realize that her faith community is unfairly discriminating against her because of her gender. Similar to the stages of grief, women experience a wide range of emotions as they become aware that their churches are not in fact enforcing the will of God, but rather imposing human wisdom in a way that quenches the Spirit and disempowers female disciples of Jesus.

While every woman's experience is different, Osiek explains that there are some patterns that are common for most women who come to a feminist awareness. These are common not just to feminist awakening, but to any journey of awareness that involves movement from fear to courage, enslavement to liberation. As she explains, these are "stages on the journey toward claiming one's own identity as a Christian woman in the face of a tradition and community that have not been receptive to that journey."²⁰

The first stage of awareness is rejection and fear. The cultural and religious systems that support a patriarchal worldview are so deep and pervasive that most women in patriarchal religious systems reject feminist ideas at first brush. Feminism in modern American culture can look many different ways, thus a woman may reject feminism out of hand associating it with sexual promiscuity or abortion rights. Additionally, our

²⁰ Carolyn Osiek, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 8.

heritage of patriarchy continues to rob women of self-confidence, leading them to fearfully reject any idea not endorsed by their religious culture. Women may also find a sense of security in the ability to abdicate ultimate responsibility. For a woman who has lived her life within the myth of male superiority, the idea that she may in fact be called by God to equal discipleship²¹ is overwhelming and frightening. Equally frightening is the idea that the religious tradition she has trusted as her main avenue toward God and vehicle from which she has received God's word is, at best, a dysfunctional system and, at worst, an agent of sinful oppression.

Most women can remember the exact event, or series of events, that propelled them through the rejection and fear stage into a place of new awareness. These "turning point events" constitute the second stage of awakening to a feminist consciousness. Turning point experiences can happen in a wide variety of ways. Some are intellectual—a woman reads a blog post explaining the importance of gender equality in the church and for some reason she hears the words differently than she has in the past, finding reasoning that has always sounded spurious now sounds somewhat valid. Other times the turning point comes not from rationally considering new ideas, but rather pops up in the context of daily life. A young mother wants to promote the upcoming Vacation Bible School to her congregation during the Sunday morning announcements. When she is told that she must write out her announcement and have a man read it, she wonders for the first time if the church's practice of keeping women silent actually lines up with God's will. Some turning point experiences are deeply painful. A woman suffers from domestic abuse at the hands of her husband for many years and finally finds the courage to go to the leaders

²¹ This term is used by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in "Sexism and Conversion," *Network* 9, no. 3 (May-June, 1981): 15-22.

of her church and ask for help. They counsel her to go home and renew her commitment to being a Godly wife, patiently waiting and praying for him to change his ways. She realizes that her non-Christian friends seem more concerned about her safety than her church family does, and she wonders if there's something deeply wrong.

Turning point events often come in clusters, each building on the one before and informing the next. Momentum builds from event to event until the point of crisis. When her eyes have been opened and she has come to see the church, the world, and even her own life in a completely different way. She cannot "unsee" what she has seen. Her worldview is permanently changed. Past events are now reexamined in light of her new knowledge, and the present is seen through a completely new lens.

The result of the crisis is usually anger. This is the third stage in the process of feminist awareness. The anger stage is not only expected and appropriate, but it is absolutely essential and its length is indefinite. As difficult as it is, it cannot be bypassed without harmful repercussions and it may last many years. "The feeling and expression of anger is the necessary and appropriate response which rises up from the depths of one's being. It is a revolt against the personal and collective memory of accumulated pain: the pain of being treated as a child, an incompetent, a non-person in a society and faith community that verbally acclaims the equality and dignity of all."²²

This stage is difficult because our culture is not comfortable with openly expressed anger, and the discomfort is greater when the angry person is a woman. There is something in expressed anger that runs deeply contrary to our most precious beliefs and values about what it means to be a woman. Our society relies so strongly on women

²² Osiek, *Beyond Anger*, 15.

to maintain the qualities that epitomize motherhood—nurture, love, compassion—that “anger in women seems to jar loose a great deal of primitive and irrational terror from both men and women who observe it.”²³

The woman who has come to feminist awareness and is experiencing anger is caught in a double bind. If she chooses to not express her anger, she is likely to feel sad and lonely, doubting the veracity of her experience and blaming herself for her pain. Repressed anger is unhealthy—physically, emotionally and spiritually. On the other hand, if a woman chooses to express her anger, she risks misunderstanding and rejection.

There is no other phase of consciousness-raising that is as difficult to deal with, as threatening to others, as liable to elicit impatience and intolerance... The angry feminist is indiscriminately stereotyped and shunned by nearly everyone who is not in the same predicament. Most men find her sharp, critical, apt to condemn them for unknown offenses. Even the husband, pastor, or male colleague who prides himself on patience and understanding finds that his patience wears thin when he is treated as if he, too, is one of the oppressors, since he has taken great pains to prove himself to be on her side. Women in the first phase of rejection and fear find her extremely threatening, for she epitomizes everything they do not want to be. Women in the second phase of grappling with events that are provoking crises for them do not want to be confronted with what they might become. Women who have passed beyond the angry stage find it embarrassing and awkward to associate with someone who demonstrates a past mode of their own behavior which they would prefer to forget because it recalls too much pain.²⁴

Because of the pervasive discomfort with expressed anger, the angry woman is forced to find support primarily among other angry women, which has its own dangers. While anger should not be seen as sinful or inherently harmful, a healthy person does not want to stay angry forever. In a healthy person anger functions as a transformative power. It is a force that will motivate and energize her to find solutions to serious, even life-

²³ Ibid., 12-13.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

threatening, problems. But when her support system is limited to women in the same stage, there is a danger that her anger will be “reinforced and entrenched instead of being processed with a view to change and transformation. When this happens a kind of stagnation sets in, and the full expression of anger rather than its repression can lead to depression, sadness, personal and collective self-pity, and a sense of hopelessness.”²⁵

Thus it is critical that a woman find people who can holistically support her through this stage. She needs relationships in which both the joy and the pain of life can be expressed, sharing laughter as well as sharing tears. “Unlike most other groups struggling for liberation, there is for many women no natural support group of persons surrounding them who are experiencing the same thing at the same time. That is why it is important and even necessary for them to seek out the kind of supportive presence they need at the time.” As I will discuss at length in the following chapters, this is the exact situation that has motivated my own research and ministry focus.

While the anger stage may last for a long time, and return again and again, one does not need to be particularly astute to know that anger is one of the most effective behavioral masks for deep, personal pain. The Christian woman who has gained feminist awareness ultimately suffers because of what she has lost. Osiek describes the fourth stage as that of the broken symbol system. “For the woman of faith, this awareness can bring about a religious crisis of severe proportions. She comes to feel as if the whole of her faith tradition has betrayed her by what it has done to women throughout its history. She sees the institutional church and all its male leaders as participants in, if not

²⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

perpetrators of, a concerted effort to undermine the human dignity, subdue the initiative, and control the lives of its women.”²⁶

The loss that a woman experiences runs deep. The outer level of loss is that of a religious faith community. The church that used to be a source of sustenance and hope has become a place of discrimination and oppression. This loss is quite tangible because it strips her of vital weekly spiritual rhythms. Gathering on Sunday for worship is no longer a joy. Rather it has become an emotional and spiritual burden. Where once she could participate in a worship service and focus her attention of matters of faith and the spirit, she now finds herself bothered and agitated by the abundance of male and absence of female voices. She is overwhelmed by the patriarchal reality of her congregation and of the church at large. Every sermon illustration that involves sports or the military makes her cringe, and she can no longer tolerate discussions about marriage or the Christian home, all of which strike her as subtly misogynistic. The credibility of the church has been permanently compromised.

It is at this point that most women seriously consider leaving their churches or institutional Christianity altogether.

Many good women have simply made the judgment that it is no longer worth the pain and struggle to stay with it. The Church is thus immensely impoverished by the loss of talent, creativity, and leadership potential. Most women who choose this say they do not do so lightly. They recognize it as the only way to survive psychically and spiritually. Some go to another denomination where they think they can find more breathing space, only to discover often that while public policies and official practices differ, attitudes and unspoken politics may not be so different after all. Others band together in new faith communities where they can be spiritually nourished, but at the price of being cut off from a tradition that

²⁶ Ibid., 17.

they have loved. Most choose to stay and try to work out a mode of survival that is at least as life-giving as it is destructive.²⁷

As devastating as it is for a woman to lose the symbol of the church “as sacrament, bearer of salvation, and something worth a lifetime of commitment,”²⁸ the disintegration of her symbol system runs far deeper. The loss can reach all the way to the core of her belief system. Once a person realizes she has been lied to she doesn’t know who or what she can trust. Everything has to be reexamined in light of this fact and nothing is off the table. She finds herself questioning timeless truths that have been passed down to her through the generations, beliefs that have grounded her and shaped her entire sense of reality. Even her ability to trust the Bible is threatened. The sacred scripture itself, the trusted “word of God,” is now tainted with the odor of chauvinism.

Many women are surprised to find themselves increasingly distressed by the image of God as male. A Christian woman who has always believed that God knows her completely and loves her unconditionally, for the first time in her life wonders if any male being, divine or human, could truly understand her. She has always found significance in the idea that she was created in the image of God, but now even this concept creates an experience of dissonance. If she was created in the image of a male God, but in her own body and spirit she is not male, then it reasons that she is somehow less of a representative of the image of God than are her male counterparts.

The affront to one’s being that this one-sidedness represents can only be appreciated by someone whose social identity is excluded from the divine imaging: an exclusively white God with middle-class values is just as offensive for those whose identity is otherwise. The religious experience of one who has grown accustomed to the assumption that God is “like me”

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁸ Ibid.

is quite different from the experience of the one who knows that God is “like the other,” a being with whom I cannot identify according to the analogy of my specific personhood.²⁹

Likewise, and to her deep dismay, the maleness of Jesus becomes yet another stumbling block. She has been told, in no uncertain terms, that the gender of Jesus and his apostles sets the precedent for exclusively male religious authority. While she was once able to accept this reasoning without heartache, it is now a source of painful confusion. If God chose only men to enact the plan of salvation and carry forth the gospel into the world, she is forced to wonder if there is any authentic place for women in the whole of the Christian faith. “The mediator has become the obstacle. If a woman cannot find an ‘I’ mirrored either in God or in Christ, what is left?”³⁰

As you can see, the broken symbol system can lead to a complete crisis of faith. A woman finds herself alienated from her friends and family, estranged from her faith community, and unable to read the Bible or pray. She is alone in the valley of the shadow of death wondering what to make of a God who could let this happen. This is the fifth stage of the awareness process which Osiek labels as that of impasse. In this stage it becomes overwhelmingly obvious that there is no good path forward.

She could try to live in a place of denial, but it is impossible for her to ignore all that she has seen and learned. She could remain angry, but after a while anger feels futile and self-destructive. She could attempt to force herself to find meaning in traditional religious practices, but instead she feels dishonest and finds the tension to be debilitating. She could take up a marginal existence with one foot in and one foot out of Christian

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ Ibid.

community, but that path looks perpetually lonely. She could leave the community and tradition altogether, but the result would be isolation, rootlessness and guilt. None of these are acceptable alternatives. Any direction in which she attempts to move leads her to yet another dead end. The problem-solving skills that she's used throughout her life—compassion, determination, logic—have all failed to provide a solution. As Osiek explains, “The forces of creation and destruction, of life and death, of consolation and desolation seem to come from the same source and to be at war within the person. It is a spiritual crisis of enormous proportions, and must be understood and treated as such.”³¹

Is there a way out? Is there a way forward for the Christian feminist? Osiek believes there is. She believes that the Christian faith and tradition is redeemable. I share her hope in the resiliency of the Christian story. “I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created” (Rom 8:38-39 CEB).³² There is a way forward. Women who travel the full journey of feminist awakening find themselves in a unique position to experience the power of the gospel. The fifth stage of awareness is the breakthrough stage.

The inevitable endpoint of the feminist awareness journey is the valley of the shadow of death. It is in this place that a woman comes face to face with her own powerlessness. Her energy is gone. Her resources are depleted. She is exhausted and hurt from years of hitting her head against the wall, hoping, longing, dying for change, only to be disappointed over and over again. While she may have found supporters and allies

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² All scriptures are CEB translation unless otherwise noted.

along the way, her victories feel insignificant compared to the injustice toward women, often in the name of God, that continues in her own backyard and around the world. The massive mountain range yet to be traversed is overwhelming. Despair threatens to drive her into apathy.

But the gospel can break through to even the darkest, most desolate places of despair in the human experience and shine the light of grace, hope and redemption. The way forward for the Christian woman who has come to a place of full, raw, painful, feminist consciousness may actually be the way forward for any woman who is suffering with a deep and disturbing knowledge of patriarchy; for any woman searching for hope, for a way to embrace life, and for a way to once again rejoice in the beauty of the world and other people. The way forward follows the path of the truest Christian story. It is the way of the cross. From the pit of despair, life can be renewed. From the place of emptiness, hope can be reborn. But the future will not look anything like the past. This narrative will be wholly new, entirely different. No less than life after death.

The Gospel Story

To understand how the power of the gospel speaks to our specific situation we must travel back to the very beginning of the Christian story. In her book *Gender and Grace*, psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen explores the Genesis account of the creation of the world and the fall of humankind.

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground" (Gen 1:26-28 CEB.).

Van Leeuwen points out a few important elements of this passage. The first is that God speaks in the plural. She explains that this is “one of our first biblical hints about the existence of the Trinity—the God/Logos/Spirit through whom all things are created and sustained... God is intrinsically social: Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit working in cooperative interdependence throughout the whole of the biblical drama.”³³ As such, human beings who are made in the image of God are also “inescapably social.” The mutuality between the man and the woman in creation is described as “one flesh.”

The second important element to notice in this passage is that the man and woman are equally created in the image of God. Neither the male nor the female is described to be a more accurate portrayal of the image of God. Rather, the parallelism in the Hebrew poetry leads us to understand that the union of male and female—the two great halves of humanity—mysteriously join together to reflect the image of God.

Finally we must notice that both the man and the woman are given by God a mutual responsibility to care for creation. Together they are told to fill the earth and subdue it, to be fruitful and multiply, and to have dominion over every other living thing.³⁴ There is no creational hierarchy within humanity. Rather, the man and woman are jointly placed as caretakers over the rest of creation. It is from this place of mutuality in their relationship to God and their responsibility for the earth that we can understand the nature of sin introduced in Genesis 3.

The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you shouldn’t eat from any tree in the garden?” The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden’s trees but not the fruit of the tree in

³³ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), Kindle Electronic Edition, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41. From Genesis 1:26-27.

the middle of the garden. God said, “Don’t eat from it, and don’t touch it, or you will die.” The snake said to the woman, “You won’t die! God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

During that day’s cool evening breeze, they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God in the middle of the garden’s trees. The Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” The man replied, “I heard your sound in the garden; I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree, which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman you gave me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate.” The Lord God said to the woman, “What have you done?!” And the woman said, “The snake tricked me, and I ate” (Gen 3:1-13).

The dominion and sociability given to humanity as fundamental aspects of their created nature are quickly abused. The woman abuses her dominion by eating of the tree from which they had been commanded not to eat. The man abuses his sociability by accepting the fruit from the woman, allowing his bond with her to take priority over his obedience to God. Through their actions sin enters the world and with it fear, shame, blame. In shame the man and woman hide from each other and from God. When God finds them and questions them about their actions they respond with blaming and accusation. The man blames God and the woman. The woman blames the serpent. Ashamed and afraid, neither takes responsibility for their actions. As Phyllis Tribble explains, “By betraying the woman before God the man opposes himself to her; by

ignoring him in her reply to God, the woman separates herself from the man ... Split apart, one flesh awaits the outcome.”³⁵ Genesis 3:14-19 describes the outcome.

The Lord God said to the snake,

“Because you did this, you are the one cursed out of all the farm animals, out of all the wild animals. On your belly you will crawl, and dust you will eat every day of your life.

I will put contempt between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers.

They will strike your head, but you will strike at their heels.”

To the woman he said, “I will make your pregnancy very painful; in pain you will bear children. You will desire your husband, but he will rule over you.”

To the man he said, “Because you listened to your wife’s voice and you ate from the tree that I commanded, ‘Don’t eat from it, ‘cursed is the fertile land because of you; in pain you will eat from it every day of your life.

Weeds and thistles will grow for you, even as you eat the field’s plants; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread—until you return to the fertile land, since from it you were taken; you are soil, to the soil you will return” (Gen 3:14-19).

They are forced to leave the garden and the joyful responsibilities given to them in creation will now become burdensome. The joyful responsibility for human reproduction will be tainted by labor and pain, as will the joyful responsibility of caring for the earth. The life that they build through their labor and pain will end with the human beings returning to the dust of the ground in death. While there is much to explore in these verses, there is one phrase in the middle of the passage that is critical for our purposes. In Genesis 3:16b God speaks to the woman saying, “You will desire your husband, but he will rule over you.”

³⁵ Phyllis Trible, *God and Rhetoric of Sexuality*, quoted in Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*, 43fn14.

This short sentence gives us a glimpse into the sinful propensities that will become common to men and common to women the world over. As biblical scholar Gilbert Bilezikian explains,

[The woman's] desire will be for her husband, so as to perpetuate the intimacy that had characterized their relationship in paradise lost. But her nostalgia for the relation of love and mutuality that existed between them before the fall, when they both desired each other, will not be reciprocated by her husband. Instead of meeting her desire, he will rule over her ... [In short], the woman wants a mate and she gets a master; she wants a lover and she gets a lord; she wants a husband and she gets a hierarch.³⁶

Van Leeuwen goes on to explain that, while this does not mean that all men at all times behave this way toward all women, there is in essence an original sin that is unique to men, “a congenital flaw in males that makes it all too easy for them to assume that they have a right to dominate women.” But this verse does not only hint at the original male sin. It also clues us in to the sinful tendencies inherent to women. While the male tendency is to allow their God-given dominion to turn into domination without regard for God's desired mutuality in relationships, the female tendency is to use the preservation of those relationships as an excuse to not exercise the dominion that was equally given to her by God in creation. Men have a tendency to turn *God-given dominion into domination*, and women have a tendency to turn *God-given sociability into passivity*.

From this perspective, we can understand that our current struggle against patriarchy and misogyny is part of the age-old spiritual battle. The responsibility to exercise dominion over the earth has been perverted into domination throughout history and around the world and we are living with the results. Theologian Charles L. Campbell speaks of how widespread domination in our world has become systematized and

³⁶ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible*, quoted in Van Leeuwen, 44fn16.

institutionalized. He labels it *the domination system*. “This system is characterized by power exercised *over* others, by control *of others*, by *ranking* as the primary principle of social organization, by *hierarchies* of dominant and subordinate, winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, honored and shamed”(italics in the original).³⁷

From this description you can see how the oppression of women is one of the largest and most pervasive effects of the domination system. Racism, classism, sexism, ethnic cleansing and genocide, war, terrorism, and the exploitation of the earth are all examples of the domination system’s far-reaching work in our world. The powers of death are at war with the powers of life. Campbell explains that this is true spiritual warfare in which we are facing “something larger than ourselves within which many of us often feel trapped and against which we often feel powerless.”³⁸ It is from this place of spiritual powerlessness that we can begin to understand the power of the gospel for Christian feminists. “For Christians the story does not end with the rebellious activity of the powers and the helplessness of human beings before them. In his life, death and resurrection Jesus has engaged and overcome the powers, setting people free for lives of faithful resistance.”³⁹ Thus we turn our attention to Jesus.

Jesus’ life stood in direct contrast to the domination system. Over and over again Jesus made it clear that his was a different way. “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36 ESV).

³⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 26. Originally Walter Wink’s term.

³⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁹ Ibid., 43.

Jesus never bullied or used violence. He rejected the social hierarchy spending his time with tax collectors and sinners, touching the ill and the demon possessed. He admonished his disciples to “turn the other cheek” and taught that the meek will inherit the earth.

Consider the following passage from the gospel of Mark.

Now when the other ten disciples heard about this, they became angry with James and John. Jesus called them over and said, “You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that’s not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you will be the slave of all, for the Human One didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people” (Mark 10:41-45).

Jesus was also radically countercultural in his interpersonal relationships, he treated women with utmost dignity and respect, as Dorothy Sayers eloquently describes in her classic essay “Are Women Human?”

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.⁴⁰

In as much as Jesus’ life stood in direct contrast to the domination system, his death did even more so. This is highlighted when Paul succinctly and poetically recounts the full scope of the Jesus story in his letter to the Philippians.

⁴⁰ Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 47.

Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11).

In this passage Paul claims the full deity of Jesus; that Jesus was in very essence God, but he took on human form and was obedient to God unto death. Paul then highlights the significance of Jesus' death on a cross.

For those of us who live in a modern democratic state where a cross is most commonly seen as a religious symbol on churches or jewelry, it is difficult to understand the significance of the fact that Jesus was killed on a cross. The first thing we need to know is that crucifixion was used to execute people that the ruling authorities viewed as political threats. Secondly, crucifixion was intentionally public. Crucifixions did not take place in the middle of nowhere. They happened at major intersections so that lots of people would walk by and see the helpless, gasping, bleeding people as they suffered through their last hours of life. Because it was public, and gruesome, and utterly horrifying, it was a perfect reminder to everyone in town of what happens if you threaten authority. We can understand it as a form of state-sponsored terrorism. The pervasive fear of those with the potential to inflict such cruel violence was enough to keep the power structure safely unchallenged. Crucifixion was a brilliant tool used to maintain and further the domination system.

So when Paul emphasizes the cross in Philippians 2, he is pointing out the fact that Jesus was a victim of the domination system. Jesus died a most humiliating and shameful death, but what is more, in killing Jesus on the cross, the earthly authorities

were exercising control using torture and terror. They were maintaining their power through the use of violence. And this is where we see the paradox of the cross. The almighty God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, creator of heaven and earth, was tortured and killed by rulers who were attempting to secure their own power. In the crucifixion, the domination system tried its hand at dominating God.

If the Jesus story ended with the cross, we would place our full emphasis on God's identification with those who are victims of oppression. As Campbell explains, "The cross itself becomes a subversion of the world's understandings of power and dominion... The violence of the powers is thoroughly subverted as God identifies not with those who inflict the violence but with the one who is its victim. No longer can such scapegoating, unjust violence claim the sanction of God in the world."⁴¹ But Christians believe that Jesus not only identified with the victims, but he was ultimately victorious over the powers that seek to steal, kill and destroy when he defeated death. The resurrection of Jesus proves in no uncertain terms that even the strongest, most vicious, worldly power is not strong enough to kill God. In his resurrection Jesus delivered the final divine judgment over the powers of domination. "And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen: Death has been swallowed up by a victory. Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death? (Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Cor 15:54-57).

⁴¹ Campbell, *The Word before the Powers*, 61.

The Power of the Gospel

We can now ask ourselves what the symbol of the cross means specifically for feminist Christians. With painful irony we must notice that just as Roman crosses were used to silence the opponents of the empire, so Christian crosses have been misused to silence women. Throughout Church history women have been encouraged to follow Jesus' example of self-denial by quietly submitting and surrendering to men in charge. But as we've seen, Jesus' death was not a demonstration of weakness. On the contrary, his death was a display of true power, overturning the claims of the domination system and defeating the power of death. The cross of Jesus leads us to do the same. As Osiek explains, "The cross can become for women a symbol not of victimization and self-hatred, but of creative suffering, actively embraced, which transforms and redeems."⁴²

Suffering, for the Christian feminist is evident and unavoidable, but it is not without precedent. Osiek explains that "Christianity has a language and a theology, based on a historical event, by which to speak of this kind of suffering: it is the cross." The apostle Paul explains that those who choose to follow Jesus will in fact be united to Jesus in death. "If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5). There is spiritual power to be found in the fact that through her suffering a woman can truly identify with Christ. Likewise there is power in knowing that Christ can truly identify with her—that in some very real and transformative way, her unique place of suffering was present in the mind of God as Jesus hung suspended on the cross.

⁴² Osiek, 65.

But the power of the cross extends beyond identification. The transformative power of the cross is offered in terms of a call and a promise. As Jesus himself explained, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-35 NRSV).

Jesus calls his followers to do as he did—to deny ourselves. It is important for us to pause and recognize that a person cannot deny that which she has never had the opportunity to truly affirm. It is, by definition, impossible to give up something that does not actually belong to you.

It is only with the acquisition of a good amount of self-knowledge, that is, with appropriate psychological and emotional maturity, that one is able to freely surrender one’s own desires, preferences and attachments for the sake of others and for the sake of union with God. Such self-denial with anything less than the full awareness and freedom of which one is capable at any given moment is not self-surrender but repression.... Self-denial well appropriated is the free and willing surrender of the sinful self. If, then, the root of women’s sinfulness is passivity and fear of acting, it follows that this is the aspect of their humanity which must be confronted and counteracted for the sake of that liberation which is a true union with God.⁴³

The call to true self-denial, the free and willing surrender of the sinful self out of maturity and self-knowledge, is modeled by Jesus who “though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit, but he emptied himself...” (Phil 2:6-7a). Jesus did not suffer from low self-esteem and he was not letting people walk all over him. His sense of self was stronger and deeper than any of ours, understanding that “the Father had given everything into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (John 13:3). It was from that place, a place of full

⁴³ Osiek, 79.

knowledge and ownership that he very consciously laid down his life. In the same reverent consciousness, we are called to do the same.

The call is immediately followed by the promise. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35 NRSV). God’s promise is that we will have life. God, the creator, the one who gave us life in the first place, has promised that if we follow the path of Jesus, consciously surrendering ourselves for the sake of the gospel, we will know truer life than we could have ever hoped for. United with Jesus in death and resurrection, we can find hope and rest in the promise that the victory over death and destruction, over oppression and domination, will truly be ours. In hope and confidence these words become ours: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God’s Son, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). The truth of the cross is that Jesus was killed and raised, humiliated and exalted, wounded and healed, and so will it be for those who choose to follow.

Thus the gospel holds immeasurable power for the Christian feminist, both theologically and practically. Knowing that God is fully with her in her frustration, heartache and suffering, she can find the strength to continue. Knowing that Jesus defeated death on the cross and was raised from the dead, she can live in the hope that God will redeem her suffering and raise her to new life. And knowing that the cross of Jesus was essential in the coming of the kingdom of God, she can find the motivation to continue carrying her cross as part of the God’s work to bring the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The Conversion Process

One way to talk about this journey is using the language of “conversion.” Osiek describes conversion as “the discovery of a new perspective from which what was previously acceptable is so no longer, and the desire to change in order to bring one’s world into conformity with that new perspective.” We tend to think of conversion involving a person changing from one religion to another. Christian conversion stories tend to center around someone putting their faith in Jesus for the first time, perhaps being baptized and calling themselves a Christian. But conversion is not limited to those who are new to the faith. In fact, as Christians we are called to remain open to our need for conversion and be willing to be converted over and over again. Conversion can contain any or all of the following elements. A moral conversion is a change from what is now seen as wrong and sinful to what is judged to be right and good. An intellectual conversion involves the recognition of the ignorance and lack of information that contributed to the way things were done in the past. And a spiritual conversion is experienced as a call to new life, entirely different from the life that was lived before.

While the Christian feminist is working for change in the minds and hearts of other people, and hoping for structural transformation in religious institutions, she may be surprised to find that through the power of the gospel the most life-giving changes come in her own soul.⁴⁴ She may experience deep and transformative conversion in all three of these areas. Women experience moral conversion when they are moved to acknowledge and turn away from the sinfulness that has been characteristic of women since the

⁴⁴ Osiek speaks of the structural conversion that is sought for the institutional church. She outlines the moral, intellectual and spiritual components necessary “for reign of God to be furthered in the church.” Osiek, *Beyond Anger*, 44.

beginning of time: the sin of passivity and acquiescence in the face of oppression.

“Conversion requires the intention and effort to cast off the sinful habits of self-doubt and self-hatred, so as to take the full responsibility for themselves that will enable women to be equal partners with men in the work of transforming society.”⁴⁵ Intellectual conversion comes when a woman can courageously admit that her perspective has been radically changed and step forward to claim the wisdom that is hers through knowledge and experience.

A woman’s spiritual conversion is broad and all encompassing. It is no less than a challenge to live out the radical call of the Christian discipleship. “The claim of the gospel cuts across all human pride and selfishness, across all desires that do not have the reign of God for their center. It challenges women to be converted according to the image of the crucified one.”⁴⁶ This conversion calls for a woman to, first of all, practice forgiveness for those who have done wrong, following the model and example of Jesus who asked forgiveness for his executioners “because they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).⁴⁷ Secondly, she is called to refuse vengeance. “Conversion requires that women forego the pleasure of hurting back for all the hurt they and their foremothers have received.”⁴⁸

The third call moves beyond forgiveness and non-retaliation to love. Jesus’ call to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us is particularly striking for those fighting gender-based oppression. “While it is hardly helpful to think of men individually

⁴⁵ Osiek, 49.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁷ Another poignant example of Jesus opposing the domination system.

⁴⁸ Osiek, 50-51.

or institutionally as enemies, it remains true that the church as instrument of sexism and patriarchalism has kept women imprisoned in repressive roles and stereotypes, thus preventing the full realization of their dignity as baptized persons.”⁴⁹ God calls us to stretch beyond the anger and the pain, and prayerfully desire good even for those who perpetuate domination. Like the love of Jesus, this is a suffering love. It does not involve excusing sin or ignoring the pain sin has caused, but it embraces a commitment to love even in the face of such violation.

It is critical to note that there are times when a woman must completely remove herself from a toxic environment. A commitment to forgiveness and love includes a commitment to wisely developing and enforcing boundaries. In fact, strong boundaries provide the spiritual and emotional space for a woman to freely practice forgiveness and love. With boundaries in place, she is able to remain engaged in a process that will undoubtedly continue to be challenging and painful. She will wrestle with a desire to fight, defend and keep score, but as disciples of Jesus we believe that it is God who fights for us. We need only to be still (Exodus 14:14). “Women, who have traditionally been seen as weak, must show that strength does not lie in abusive force or stereotyping arrogance, but in calmly claiming one’s own authority and in acknowledging one’s limitations and weaknesses without fear.”⁵⁰

The Path Forward

We have explored the process of feminist awakening traveled by women in patriarchal faith traditions from the beginning of awareness to the personal and spiritual

⁴⁹ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 51-52.

crisis to the dead end of impasse. And we have explored how God reaches into the place of impasse with the power of life through the gospel. We've looked at how the calls and the promises of the gospel can transform the journey from one of death into one of life and hope. But the daily challenge continues for every woman on this journey. The option to simply "get out," disengaging from the problems and pain, is always available. Thus, before we finish I want to look at some of the good reasons to stay the course and continue to fight the good fight.

Osiek explains it this way,

The first task of women, as it is of men as well, is to find themselves, lay hold of their hopes, dreams and aspirations. Once the self is found, the person holds full responsibilities for it. How will it be used, given, spent?...There are only two options: to turn inward and search for one's own continual gratification, and leave the suffering to others; or to turn outward in gift to others, and to embrace one's share of suffering. The latter does not mean the squelching of the desires and dreams but rather their transformation; it does not mean returning to destructive oppressive structures but taking action to change them.⁵¹

Every woman must discern through prayerful deliberation what exact course of action God is calling her to in any given season of her life. God is infinitely creative when it comes to using people in the pursuit of justice, wholeness and healing. There is no one-size-fits-all job description for laborers in the vineyard of the Lord. We cannot expect the work to be easy. It is hard, and sometimes deeply painful, but it is never lacking in joy. A lack of joy is an indication that the wrong path has been chosen. Continual despair should serve as an alarm, indicating that something is off and more

⁵¹ Ibid., 81-82.

support and discernment is needed. As Frederick Buechner reminds us, “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁵²

Those who heed the call to stay engaged, to remain in the conversation and take on the hard work of change, play a prophetic role. Like the prophets of old, they are called “to speak and act publicly in the name of God to recall members of the community to their destiny and identity before God; to interpret the signs of the times; to condemn injustice; to keep before the eyes of all the vision of the reign of God in its full purity in the midst of historical compromises.”⁵³ It is helpful to remember the biblical expectations for prophets. “The true prophet does not choose to be prophet, but she is chosen by God; she does not choose the message, the ways, the times or the places, but they are chosen for her by God; her effectiveness comes not in the ways she expects, but in the ways she does not expect; reactions of resentment and hostility to her unpopular message are inevitable. No prophet should expect to be liked and appreciated by everyone. It is enough that she is faithful to her God.”⁵⁴

David Scholer, my New Testament professor at Fuller Seminary and one of the earliest and most prolific evangelical advocates for the full biblical equality of women, admonished his students to “never forget the women who come behind you.”⁵⁵ Once we have found freedom from patriarchal beliefs and practices we have the option to walk out the door never to return. But women will continue to hear and internalize oppressive messages, distorting the gospel, and keeping them exploited, patronized and

⁵² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (London: Mowbray, 1994), 119.

⁵³ Osiek, 82.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁵⁵ From David Scholar's Fuller Seminary class “Women, Bible and Ministry,” summer 1996.

marginalized. Don't forget them! They need us. They need to know the truth of the gospel that will set them free. So with courage, commitment and faith, let's "run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne" (Heb 12:1-2).

CHAPTER THREE: FAITHFUL SPEECH

The conversations, debates, and arguments about gender roles in church certainly range in scope, but much of the focus in the Churches of Christ is on the following passages:

“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (1 Timothy 2:12, NRSV).

“...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says” (1 Corinthians 14:34, NRSV).

I believe it is important for those who take the Bible seriously to critically study these passages in order to reach a responsible and faithful conclusion about their meaning and the implications for the modern church. Both of these passages have been thoroughly examined by many scholars and there is an abundance of high quality exegetical analysis and commentary available.⁵⁶ I am fully convinced that Paul was speaking to specific situations within a specific culture and had no intention of these words becoming normative for all time.

It is important to notice that both of these passages include the word “silent.” Women are told in both places that they are to be “silent” in the church. Not quiet. Not respectful. Not simply submissive or obedient or deferential. But silent. Silent is a strong word. Silent means not singing, not chatting with friends, and not whispering to children.

⁵⁶ See Appendix C for recommended reading.

Silence is absolute. I think it is safe to say that very few Christian traditions have followed Paul's literal instructions. Current practices vary, as do the exegetical convictions regarding these passages. However, many churches do continue to believe that Paul's instructions are to be taken as normative for faith and practice today.

Since it is practically impossible to enforce a literal silence rule, the silence commands are often taken to be metaphorical. The understanding is that Paul is commanding women to have a "spirit of silence," rather than telling them to be literally silent in the churches. This "spirit of silence" requirement manifests itself in all different ways depending on the congregation. Churches of Christ have always encouraged women to sing, loudly, with joy and energy in worship. But beyond congregational singing, current congregational practices vary widely regarding the ways in which women are permitted to verbally participate in worship.

Many denominations and congregations have taken on the challenge of investigating these passages to find out if there might be alternate ways to faithfully understand Paul's words and intentions. Unfortunately this important investigation often begins and ends with the prohibitive scriptures quoted above. The study of the "prohibition scriptures" can yield one of only two practical results. Either the prohibition remains or the prohibition is removed. Thus at the end of what is often a long and arduous journey women will receive one of the following messages. They may hear "No. God does not want you to speak." Or they may hear, "Yes. It's fine with God if you speak."

The second conclusion should be exciting and liberating, but it is not. Determining that "it's fine with God" is neither inspiring nor motivating. Church leaders

should not be surprised when women do not jump at the chance to speak when they are finally invited. A woman who has lived in spiritual silence all of her life is not going to feel the freedom or the courage to change her ways just because she learns that it is “fine with God.” The truth of the gospel, however, is that Christian speech is not simply “fine with God.” On the contrary, it is God’s deepest desire that all of creation verbalize faith, prayer and praise. The whole of scripture witnesses to this divine desire. As we look across the breadth of scripture and at the central message of the gospel we will discover that the life of Christian discipleship for women, as well as for men, is indeed a life of speech.

Designed for Speech

I have five children. As I write this today, my youngest child is three years old and my oldest is sixteen. Recently the children got into an animated conversation about their first words. “What was my first word?” “What was your first word?” “I think your first word was dog.” “I know what my first word was! It was Dodgers!” They turned to me for confirmation and I had to admit that the whole subject is blurred in the recesses of my mommy mind among so many other beautiful memories with fuzzy details. I will tell you, however, that when every single one of those five children said their first word, their father and I were over the moon with excitement about it. We believed we would remember every detail of that day for the rest of our lives. And we do remember—the excitement, even if we have forgotten the exact details.

Human beings are verbal creatures. We begin learning language the minute we are born as our parents, grandparents, siblings and friends welcome us into the world using language. Babies are exposed to language all day, every day, to the point where they pick up language without being taught. When children speak their first words their

families rejoice because the circle of verbal communication is complete. When a child begins to talk parents come to know the child in a new, deeper, way. The baby they have loved, nurtured and protected has begun the process of becoming an individual person with expressed thoughts and feelings that are separate from those of the parents. Because of this development the parents take on new roles. In addition to the role of speaker, they now play the role of listener and interpreter. Words are repeated, pronunciation is corrected, questions are asked, and interpretations are made.

I interviewed New York City-based speech and language pathologist Julie Short who explained that language is about engagement, reciprocity and connection. Through language we are able to engage with the world around us. Language develops when children begin to notice things outside of themselves and first words are heard when a child attempts to name those things. Over time a child notices the relationship between objects and tries to put those relationships into words. For example, a child learns the word “mommy” and also the word “shoe.” Then the child tries putting the words together—“mommy shoe.” Within the first 12 to 18 months of life a child has learned that the world is full of objects, people and relationships that can be identified through words, and they have learned that they can engage with the world around them using these words.⁵⁷

Identifying objects is only the first step in the child’s ability to engage. What’s more exciting is that using language a child can engage with other people. This is the concept of reciprocity in language—one person speaks while another person listens, then the roles are reversed. When a mother hears her child say the words “mommy shoe,” for

⁵⁷ Julie A. Short, interview with author, New York, November 7, 2017.

example, she begins the process of interpreting and reciprocating. She will say something like “Yes, that’s mommy’s shoe.” Or “Do you want me to put on my shoe?” And maybe “Oh, you want me to put my shoes on so we can go to the park!” The mother’s feedback encourages the child to respond with more language. This process is repeated over and over, hundreds of times every day. The reciprocity of language creates connection. Through language we are able to reach outside of our own bodies and connect to other people. Children learn that they can use words to tell someone about their individual needs, wants and experiences. In this way they can open their private world to the people who love them.

Language is the integration of content, form and usage.⁵⁸ Content refers to the meanings of words and what they represent. Form refers to the sounds the body makes when forming words and the rules used to create words and phrases. And usage refers to the way words are used to match specific situations and to create relevant, meaningful interaction. Breath is pushed through the vocal cords to create vibrations; the mouth and tongue turn the vibrations into specific shapes that symbolize recognizable content which are then released from the body in the form of words which in turn “carry the energy of one’s being into the universe through sound.”⁵⁹ This process is a combination of highly complicated brain functions in which the brain controls the breath, the vocal physiology, as well as the choice of the specific content to be communicated. Language truly involves the whole person—mind, body and spirit. All of this develops in a child with very little

⁵⁸ Margaret Lahey and Lois Bloom, *Language Disorders and Language Development* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

⁵⁹ Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Lucas Park Books, 2014), 8.

effort. Parents speak to their children without being told to do so and typically developing children learn to talk without lessons or flashcards.⁶⁰

Through language we not only come to know the people around us, but we also learn to speak and listen to ourselves. We use words to organize our thoughts and feelings so that we can understand ourselves. In this way we use words to regulate our emotions and impulses. Language is an intricate part of the human design. Christians can understand language as part of our created, God-given, human nature. Human beings were created to speak. The creation story itself emphasizes the importance of the spoken word.

The Language of Creation

Genesis tells of a world that was without shape or form until God spoke into the darkness and created light. God saw that the light was good, and named the light “day” and the darkness “night.” The poetic rendering of the creation story continues with God speaking the whole world into existence, declaring the goodness of the creation and giving each created thing a name. The Genesis account of creation stands in contrast to other ancient creation traditions. In the Babylonian creation myth, for example, creation is the result of a violent interaction between the gods. Evil exists before creation and deities relate to each other through violence. But the biblical story is of a good God who creates a good creation using only words. As theologian Charles Campbell explains, “From the very beginning the Word of God is set over against violent domination.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Like any natural function in a broken world, sometime things don’t line up the way they were intended to and intervention can help. Speech pathologists help adults and children with misalignment in any of the three areas.

⁶¹ Campbell, 73.

On the sixth day God created human beings and spoke directly to them. Of all the wonders God created, the human beings were the only ones created in the image of God and the only ones spoken to by God. If God is speaking to them, we can correctly assume that they have been created with the ability to listen. We can also correctly assume that they were created with the ability to verbally respond. Human beings were created for reciprocal relationship. As parents speak to their baby in anticipation of a loving relationship fostered by reciprocal speaking and listening, so God submits to a relationship of mutual speaking and listening with the human beings God has lovingly created.

The Language of the Pentateuch

Throughout the Hebrew Bible the verbal relationship between God and people continues to be central to the story of faith. Beginning with the account of creation, continuing through the fathers and mothers of Israel, in the words of the psalms as well as those of the prophets, the divine being is presented as one who both speaks and listens. In the book of Exodus, God calls to Moses out of the burning bush. “Moses, Moses!” Moses answers God with the words “Here I am.” God responds to Moses and commands him to remove his sandals for he is standing on “holy ground.” Then God speaks out of the bush,

I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I’ve come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that’s full of milk and honey(Ex 3:7-8a).

In this interaction we hear the voice of God, the voice of Moses, as well as the voices of the Hebrew people. God not only reaches out to the people through the process of speech, but God also takes in the experience of the people by listening to their words. The God of the Exodus story is a listening God whose ears are attuned to the people’s

cries. Using language God makes a covenant with the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 5 Moses retells the story of God's covenant with the people. He remembers the voice of God from the past, but as he tells the story the community is reminded that the words are equally directed to them in the present. "The LORD didn't make this covenant with our ancestors but with us—all of us who are here and alive right now" (Deut 5:3).

Theologians Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson examine this exchange in their 1999 book *Saved From Silence*.

When God is rendered as "voice" the remembering of the story in Deuteronomy is not a longing for the past; rather, the remembering is a reminder that God is capable of speaking to each and every generation—and does, in order to sustain the life of the covenant claims. Voice was an indication to the community that God was living, that God was still dynamically present with them even as they prepared for their new venture. Voice was indicative of a God in relationship.⁶²

The verbal nature of the relationship is emphasized when Moses repeatedly admonishes the people to "hear" the words of the Lord. He introduces the Ten Commandments by beckoning the people to "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently" (Dt 5:1b). Likewise, the foundational words of the Shema call the people to "Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Dt 6:4-6). The people are called to listen deeply to the covenant commitments present in the words of God. "Throughout its history, Israel understood itself to be a 'called people.' Yahweh was a God who spoke and the Israelites were a people called to hear... To hear is to truly be in the presence of. When the people

⁶² Turner and Hudson, *Saved from Silence*, 25.

heard all the words that Yahweh had spoken, they answered in one voice (Exodus 24:3-6, 8). Addressed by God they were moved to speech.”⁶³ Two-way verbal communication is essential to our understanding of the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

The Language of the Psalms

The Psalms also give witness to a God who speaks and listens, and continually invites people to speak and listen in return. Walter Brueggeman suggests that three broad categories of Psalms—praise, lament and thanksgiving—can be understood as giving voice to the human experiences of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.⁶⁴ The desire to articulate these experiences is a uniquely human longing. Brueggemann explains, “When we turn to the Psalms it means we enter into the midst of that voice of humanity and decide to take our stand with that voice. We are prepared to speak among them, with them and for them, to express our solidarity in this anguished, joyous human pilgrimage. We add a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that besets us all.”

In psalms of praise the psalmists give voice to a sense of orientation, proclaiming the goodness of God and of creation. “Heaven is declaring God’s glory; the sky is proclaiming his handiwork” (Ps 19:1 CEB). In psalms of lament the psalmists give voice to disorientation, crying out to God, describing their distress, and calling on God to intervene. “Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint; preserve my life from the dread enemy” (Ps 64:1 NRSV). And in psalms of thanksgiving the psalmists give voice to the experience of reorientation, relieved that God has heard their cry and answered their

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Walter Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007), 6.

prayers. “But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me” (Ps 66:19-20 NRSV).

Time and again the psalmists are assured that their voice is being heard; that God is listening. “In my distress I cried out to the Lord; I called to my God for help. God heard my voice from his temple; I called to him for help, and my call reached his ears” (Ps 18:6 CEB). Thus the Psalms not only record the prayers of the people but demonstrate that the human cry has found an audience. The one who created our voices grants us authority to speak, committing to listen to us as we speak our way through the full range of human experiences and emotions.⁶⁵ The psalmist knows, as do we, that “listening is an active posture of love.”⁶⁶ When someone truly, patiently, humbly listens to our words, we feel loved by that person. The psalms testify to the almighty God lovingly listening to the words of mortal creatures. As Psalm 8 celebrates, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:3-4 NRSV).

The Language of the Prophets

While the psalmists called on God to listen to the community, the prophets called the community to listen to God.⁶⁷ A large section of the Old Testament tells of the

⁶⁵ Turner and Hudson, *Saved from Silence*, 22. “Through resistant speech, the one who cries out is able to move from suffering to assurance that God is still with her. Why? Because her voice has found an audience. The One who created voice grants it authority.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 21.

prophets God who were called to speak to the people on God's behalf. As Turner and Hudson explain, "Just as Isaiah hears the voice of Yahweh crying, 'Whom shall I send?' (6:8), so Ezekiel and Jeremiah are visited by the 'word of Yahweh' that finds them and speaks to them. The word is active. It is spoken. It is spirit and sound."⁶⁸ God uses this "spirit and sound" to call the prophets to "a vocation of listening and speaking."⁶⁹

The three-way exchange between the people, the prophet, and God repeats itself over and over again in the prophetic scriptures. The people cry out to God. God speaks to the people. Sometimes the people listen to God, but many times they don't. God speaks to the prophet and the prophet speaks God's words to the people. Sometimes the people listen to the prophet, but many times they don't. The phrase "Thus says Yahweh," is repeated to remind the people that the prophet's words come from God and carry divine authority.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible the voice of God and the voices of the people God created are central to the story of faith. God spoke the world into existence, breathed life into human beings and animated them to speak to God and to each other. God created human beings with the ability to listen and made a commitment to listen to them. In contrast to idols who cannot speak (Jer 10:5), and the false gods who do not answer (1 Kings 18:26), the God of Israel is a God who is in relationship with the people, a relationship that brings the hope of redemption. "Voice is the agency of the living God. It is a dynamic spiritual force that makes covenant and calls us to new life. Through voice and the act of speaking, God calls a people into existence. Nothing in the world of things

⁶⁸ Turner and Hudson, 28.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

can satisfy the fundamental hunger in the human spirit for the voice and presence of the living God.”⁷⁰

The Language of the Gospels

The centrality of spoken language continues in the New Testament. The power of voice in the Christian faith is clear from the very beginning of all four gospels. The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth through the eyes of Joseph. Throughout the first two chapters of the book Joseph heard the voice of God. From his marriage to Mary (1:20-21) to their escape from Herod into Egypt (2:13), God spoke to Joseph giving him specific instructions regarding the birth of the messiah. Joseph is portrayed as a righteous man, listening to God’s voice and obeying God’s word.

The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist, “the voice shouting in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” (Mark 1:3 CEB). John is portrayed as a preacher proclaiming an important message. When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, a voice spoke from heaven saying “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). The voice of John prepared the people to hear the voice of God which designated Jesus as the one who would go forth uniquely speaking the words of God.

The Gospel of John begins with a theological prologue which refers to Jesus as “the Word.” The beginning of the book echoes back to the creation narrative with the claim “In the beginning was the Word.” As God created the world with a word, God now acts in Jesus, the very “word” of God who was with God and was God (1:1). Theologian N.T. Wright explains how the “word” metaphor functions in this theological framework.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 33.

When I speak a word, it is, in a sense, part of me. It's a breath that comes from inside me, making the noise that I give it with my throat, my mouth and my tongue. When people hear it, they assume I intended it. 'But you said...' people comment, if our deeds don't match up to our words. We remain responsible for the words we say.

And yet our words have a life which seems independent of us. When people hear them, words can change the way they think and live. Think of "I love you"; or, "It's time to go"; or, "You're fired." These words create new situations. People respond or act accordingly. The words remain in their memory and go on affecting them.

In the Old Testament, God regularly acts by means of his "word." What he says, happens—in Genesis itself, and regularly thereafter. "By the word of the Lord," says the psalm, "the heavens were made" (33.6). God's word is the one thing that will last, even though people and plants wither and die (Isaiah 40.6–8); God's word will go out of his mouth and bring life, healing and hope to Israel and the whole creation (Isaiah 55.10–11). That's part of what lies behind John's choice of "Word" here, as a way of telling us who Jesus really is.⁷¹

Throughout the book of John, Jesus reminds his hearers that his words are not his own, rather they come from the one who sent him (3:34, 7:16, 8:26, 12:49, 14:24). The writer of John makes it clear that in Jesus, God's very words are heard. Thus Jesus is identified as one and the same with God in a unique and mystical union.

The Gospel of Luke begins with a fascinating narrative in which voice and silence are dramatically reversed. The first people we meet in this narrative are Zechariah and Elizabeth, a married couple who were "righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations" (1:6). Luke explains that "they had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old" (1:7). It is important to understand the cultural realities that would have affected Elizabeth's life. As a woman, she would have understood her primary function

⁷¹ N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone* (London: SPCK, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), Kindle Electronic Edition, 3.

in life as that of bearing children, specifically sons, for her husband. Thus as an elderly woman without children, she would have carried a burden of shame. The people around her would have reinforced her self-inflicted shame, by viewing her as less than whole and personally flawed in a deep and significant way. As Turner and Hudson explain, her person and station in life would have left her with limited personal power and voice. “Elizabeth was considered unworthy to speak on two counts. As a woman, Elizabeth was silenced by a society that would not permit her to speak in public. As a childless woman, Elizabeth was shamed into silence by a community that sanctioned motherhood as the primary source of honor for her.”⁷²

Zechariah, on the other hand, was a man with social standing and a good measure of religious authority. He was a priest and he had been chosen by lottery to have the honor of entering the Holy of Holies and burning incense to the Lord. We are told that all of the people were gathered to pray outside when Zechariah entered the sanctuary alone. It was in this most holy space that an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. Not surprisingly, when Zechariah saw the angel he was “startled and overcome with fear” (1:12). The angel told him that his wife would give birth to a son, that the boy was to be named John; that “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth,” and “he will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God” (1:15b-16). While Zechariah knew the profound importance of his ancestors’ miraculous birth stories (Genesis 18), in his shock he did not believe that the words of the angel could possibly be true for his own family. As a result of his disbelief, Zechariah lost his voice. This priest of the people had to leave the Holy of Holies and return to the waiting and wondering crowds gesturing

⁷² Turner and Hudson, 36.

wildly in an effort to silently communicate what he had seen and heard. He was unable to deliver the word of benediction because he had no voice.

The significance of the fact that Luke's gospel begins with Zachariah's silence cannot be overstated. The society and the religious establishment had given Zechariah the privilege to speak. His wife Elizabeth had been silenced by the same society and religious establishment. But the gospel is the story of God breaking into the human experience and doing something entirely new, unrestrained by restrictive societal and religious norms that silence certain groups of people. While Zechariah spent the next nine months pondering the miracle in silence, Elizabeth rejoiced because her silence and shame had been removed (1:25).

Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy served as a testimony to her cousin Mary. Mary was much younger than Elizabeth, a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Like Zechariah, Mary was also visited by an angel. This time, however, it was not in the temple but in her small hometown of Nazareth. Perhaps it was her youthful, optimistic personality, or openness to the Spirit's unconventional ways, but for whatever reason Mary responded to the celestial visitor in a way that was markedly different than that of Zechariah. Instead of being "overcome by fear," she was "confused" by his words and "wondered" what kind of greeting he might bring. This angel spoke of another miraculous birth, but Mary's son would not be conceived in her by human sexual relations. Rather, this baby would be conceived by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The angel explained, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be Holy. He will be God's son" (1:35).

Mary's verbal and nonverbal responses to the angel's words demonstrate wisdom, courage and faith beyond her years. She says to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said" (1:38). The angel had told her about her cousin Elizabeth's surprise pregnancy, reminding her that "Nothing is impossible for God" (1:37), so when the angel left, Mary immediately traveled to visit Elizabeth. The interaction between Mary and Elizabeth as recorded in Luke 1 is nothing short of amazing. In Luke 1:41-45, the male writer of this gospel shares the details of an intimate conversation between two pregnant women. Women who are pregnant with possibility, eager with expectation, speak to each other about their unborn babies and about the kingdom God is birthing in and through them. Elizabeth speaks loudly with prophetic power to Mary (1:42-45), and Mary responds with the words that ring through history as the Magnificat (1:46-55). Mary's words are eloquent, bold and powerfully prophetic. The paradox is poignant—a teenage peasant girl, pregnant with Israel's Messiah, authoritatively proclaiming God's coming kingdom and the dramatic reversals that kingdom will bring.

The first chapter of Luke ends with the birth of Elizabeth's baby. She tells her neighbors and friends that the baby's name is John, but they reject her words insisting that the baby should be named after his father. It is not until Zechariah confirms in writing that Elizabeth's pronouncement is definitive that his voice is restored. As Turner and Hudson summarize, "Luke's Gospel opens with a figure of authority who is shamed into silence and two silent women who are inspired to speak with authority. Zechariah's

voice is restored only after he experiences the shame of his own voicelessness and comes to trust the authority of other unlikely persons who give voice to reality.”⁷³

As we move further into the Gospels, we will see that the meaning of Jesus’ life cannot be separated from the words he spoke. Far from being a silent, mystical figure, Jesus was a person who engaged in meaningful, reciprocal language. His teachings and conversations recorded in the gospels have been passed down through the ages as central to the Christian faith. His public ministry began in a synagogue in Nazareth. In the middle of the Sabbath worship gathering Jesus stood and read the words of the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18). When he was done reading he explained to those gathered that these words were written about him. “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it” (Luke 4:21). Jesus’ first responsibility as God’s anointed one was verbal proclamation (Luke 4:14-30). He continued to teach and preach, both in the synagogue (Mark 1:39) as well as in public places to large groups (Luke 13:10). We are told that crowds followed him and listened to his teaching (Mark 10:1).⁷⁴ His words of admonition, encouragement and challenge have been repeated and meditated upon by Christians and non-Christians alike.

The Gospels also tell of intimate conversations between Jesus and his followers, friends and strangers. We remember Nicodemus, the Pharisee who found Jesus at night in

⁷³ Turner and Hudson, 38.

⁷⁴ Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

order to ask important questions (John 3:1-21); and the unnamed woman from Samaria that Jesus met at Jacob's well in the middle of the day and engaged in sophisticated dialogue around theological and personal matters (John 4:1-41). When his friend Lazarus was dying, Jesus engaged in important conversations with both his disciples as well as his friend Martha, Lazarus's sister (John 11:1-16, 17-27).

Jesus used language in other significant ways. He healed people using words (Mark 2:9-10) and raised the dead with a verbal command (Mark 5:41, Luke 7:14). He silenced the voices of evil spirits (Mark 1:25) and audibly commanded them to leave (Matthew 17:18). When Jesus himself is met by the devil in the wilderness he responded not by hiding or fleeing, but with language—words from the Hebrew scriptures, passed down from generation to generation, communicating God's promises (Luke 4:1-13).

Verbal communication was also an important component of Jesus' relationship with God. While he may have engaged in times of silent meditation, the Gospels make record of Jesus praying to the Almighty using words. He models prayer for his followers and admonishes them to pray "The Lord's Prayer" (Luke 11:1-4). He also prays for them and all who will believe because of their words (John 17). Finally, he turns to God in prayer in the face of sadness, despair (Mark 14:36), and death (Mark 15:34, Luke 23:46). While we can only begin to understand the mysterious and unique relationship of knowledge and love that exists within the trinity, the Jesus we come to know in the gospels prayed to his father using human language.

The theological significance of Jesus' verbal ministry is identified in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:17 Paul writes that Jesus "came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (NRSV). In identifying Jesus'

proclamation of peace, Paul is not simply describing the subject matter of his sermons, but also signaling that this proclamation of peace was intricately tied to the character of Jesus' life and ministry. Charles Campbell explains that Jesus' verbal ministry was one of the primary ways in which the gospel was incarnated in Jesus. The fact that Jesus came preaching peace, as opposed to demanding compliance by use of force, is central to understanding the mission of God in Jesus.

“Jesus came preaching peace.” That sentence is not just a statement about the message Jesus proclaimed: the good news of God's domination-free order. That statement also refers to the *means* Jesus chose to embody and further that peaceable reign. Jesus did not choose the means of the Domination System. He did not choose coercion. He did not choose weapons of war—though some apparently hoped he would. He did not choose the way of domination—though he was tempted with this option out in the wilderness. In short, he did not choose violence. From the temptation to the cross, the only sword Jesus wielded was “the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.”⁷⁵

We see the dynamic struggle between force and peace dramatically played out in John 18. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, he engaged them using language.

Judas brought a company of soldiers and some guards from the chief priests and Pharisees. They came there carrying lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus knew everything that was to happen to him, so he went out and asked, “Who are you looking for?” They answered, “Jesus the Nazarene” (John 18:3-5a).

Twice Jesus identified himself to them with the words “I am.” Feeling intimidated by the large company of soldiers and protective of his Lord, Simon Peter quickly resorted to the use of physical violence. He drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant Malchus. But Jesus reprimanded him, “Put your sword away! Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?” (John 18:11).

⁷⁵ Campbell, 72.

Jesus was bound and taken to the High Priest who questioned him about his disciples and his teaching. In answering the high priest Jesus points to his spoken words. “I’ve spoken openly to the world. I’ve always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews gather. I’ve said nothing in private. Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I told them. They know what I said” (John 18:20-21). In response to these words, the guards increase their physical intimidation. “After Jesus spoke, one of the guards standing there slapped Jesus in the face. ‘Is that how you would answer the high priest?’ he asked” (18:22). Jesus’ response highlights the contrast between peace and force, “If I speak wrongly, testify about what was wrong. But if I speak correctly, why do you strike me?” (18:23). Jesus’ words to Pilate crystalize the vision of God’s domination-free order. “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here” (18:36).

Campbell also points out that in proclaiming peace Jesus not only rejected violence but he also rejected silence.⁷⁶ The willingness to speak and to listen is a willingness to be in relationship. This is by definition a posture of humility and respect. Those who denominate others are unwilling to engage in reciprocal verbal communication. We see this in our world today as much as they did the first century. As Turner and Hudson explain,

The control of power in relationship affects the voice and silence of each group within a system. One in power easily assumes the right to speak. Others are denied that right or must seek permission in order to be heard. In some cases, even when an oppressed voice speaks, especially without the permission of the powerful, that voice is ineffective, because the

⁷⁶ Campbell, 74.

powerful cannot bear to hear it. Thus, the struggle for voice is not only a struggle to speak, but also a search for an audience to listen.⁷⁷

The contrasts between oppressive rulers and the Prince of Peace are stark.

Throughout his life Jesus invited people into conversation with him. He spoke and listened to those whom society deemed to be important as well as those who were seen as worthless. No one was denied an audience with him. Pharisees and prostitutes, tax collectors and widows, even little children were welcomed and spoken to by Jesus. In his life and ministry, “Jesus sticks with preaching, for that is the means that is ethically consistent with the peaceable reign of God he inaugurates. Through his preaching, Jesus engages in a ‘third way’ that avoids both passivity and violence.”⁷⁸

The Language of the Church

As the Gospels come to a close, the focus shifts from the language of Jesus to that of his followers. While the four gospels highlight different stories from the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, they all include important narratives regarding the role the followers of Jesus will play in the verbal communication of Jesus’ message. Matthew records the following final words from Jesus:

Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age” (Matthew 28:18b-20).

Jesus’ language in Mark is similar, commanding his followers to “Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to every creature” (Mark 16:15). In both of

⁷⁷ Turner and Hudson, 16-17.

⁷⁸ Campbell, 77.

these accounts, Jesus commands them to follow in his footsteps of preaching and teaching so that the world will come to know the good news of God.

The focus of Luke and John is a little different. Rather than commanding them to go and preach, the focus is on how the Holy Spirit will come upon them and empower them to speak this message. Luke quotes Jesus as saying, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And in the Gospel of John, Jesus sends his followers out with these words: “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven” (John 20:23).

Taken as a whole we can see that Jesus ends his ministry by promising them that the Holy Spirit will empower them to speak. They are not to remain silent, nor are they to rely on their own wisdom or power. But they are to boldly go into all the world preaching the gospel, relying on the Spirit of God to empower them for ministry. As Turner and Hudson explain,

The Holy Spirit, sacred ruach, breathes through women and men, old and young, single and married, slaves and free persons, Jew and non-Jew, and empowers them to speak with authority and truth. The same ruach disables the powerful, silences the demonic, and breathes life into death. The Spirit breathes through Jesus in a limitless way, combining into one single voice the harmony of the voices of prophets throughout the ages. In turn, Jesus promises power to the disciples, and the Spirit sweeps through their silence and draws forth multiple voices alive with the presence of God.⁷⁹

Exactly how this will happen is seen as the story continues in the second chapter of Acts.

⁷⁹ Turner and Hudson, 47.

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages (Acts 2:1-6).

Just as the Spirit of God physically and audibly identified Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:21-22), the Spirit of God descends on the followers of Jesus in a physical way, empowering and equipping them to continue the work of the gospel. As Turner and Hudson explain, “Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the believers are commissioned and empowered for a prophetic ministry that models the ministry of Jesus. The result of the Spirit’s presence with the disciples was the power to speak.”⁸⁰ It is particularly important to notice the following proclamation made at Pentecost by Peter in which he quotes the words of the prophet Joel.

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, “Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren’t drunk, as you suspect; after all, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:
In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your young will see visions.
Your elders will dream dreams.
Even upon my servants, men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.”
(Acts 2:14-18)

Peter’s words indicate that Pentecost marks the transition from God’s work in the world through Jesus the Messiah to God’s work in the world through the church. As the Spirit of God uniquely empowered Jesus for ministry, so the church is uniquely

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43.

empowered by that same Spirit. It is important for us to notice how the church in this picture looks nothing like the social order of the day or the religious establishment. The boundaries of race, gender, age and social status have been erased. Likewise, ordinary people, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, together receive the Spirit of God and are empowered to speak. The presence of the Spirit makes a completely new kind of community possible, a community marked by equality and freedom, grace and redemption. As Turner and Hudson explain,

The power of the Spirit to speak and proclaim the new ordered reality of God is given first to Jesus, the chosen of God. After his death and resurrection, the gift is transferred to the community of faith. The power to speak about a liberation that radically reverses the established order is distributed broadly to those who would follow in the prophetic pathway of Jesus. The purpose of speaking is identical: “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”(Luke 4: 18–19). The truth of this proclamation is verified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who was anointed by the same Spirit.⁸¹

The Bible consistently witnesses to the fact that it is the Spirit of God that empowers us to speak and to listen. The *ruach*⁸² that God breathed into human beings at creation is the same Spirit that descended on Jesus when he was baptized, the same Spirit that empowered Jesus’ ministry, and the same Spirit that was poured out on Christians at Pentecost empowering the church for authoritative and prophetic speech. “The prophetic authority of Jesus’ voice was transferred to the voices of all who sought the realm of God. Communities of people, not just lone prophets, were empowered by the Spirit to listen to God, others, and self in a way that compelled them to speak. The community

⁸¹ Ibid., 44-45.

⁸² Hebrew, for breath or spirit.

sought to live out of a dynamic relationship that sustained the mutual conversation among human beings and God.”⁸³

As we read through the New Testament’s witness of the earliest church, we continue to see the importance of language. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul expresses the importance of clear verbal communication in worship when discussing the speaking of tongues in worship. Even the music in the worship of the early church was populated with meaningful language.⁸⁴ In Ephesians 5 he encourages the Christian community to “sing and make music to the Lord” with “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19). When discussing spiritual gifts and the various roles played by members of the early church, the majority are language based as seen in Ephesians 4. “He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God’s people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God’s Son” (Eph 4:11-13a).

As we have seen, the whole of scripture testifies to the importance of language in the Christian Faith. From the very beginning when God spoke and created the world all the way to Jesus speaking the words of the great commission—words that would send his followers out into the world empowered by the Spirit to speak the words of the gospel—there is no way to understand the Christian faith apart from human language. This is not at all surprising when we believe that God is the one who created us to be verbal creatures, with the ability to use language to build relationships of mutual love and understanding with others, God and ourselves. It is also not surprising to imagine that the

⁸³ Turner and Hudson, 51-52.

⁸⁴ See 1 Corinthians 14:15 CEB, “What should I do? I’ll pray in the Spirit, but I’ll pray with my mind too; I’ll sing a psalm in the Spirit, but I’ll sing the psalm with my mind too,” <http://bible.com/37/1co.14.15.ceb>.

culmination of the coming of the Kingdom of God will have a significant verbal component. We can begin to imagine how this might look by reading John's vision of the new heaven and new earth in the book of Revelation. In chapter 7 he describes a community, beautiful in its diversity, joining voices in praise to God:

After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice: "Victory belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9-10).

The Language of Christians

As Christians today we live within this sacred tradition of language. Language is a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith. Just as we have explored the breadth of language in scripture, it is important for us to consider the many ways in which language influences and shapes our faith and practice as Christians.

Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). One of the ways human beings love is through language; thus, we can understand in these commandments God's desire for human beings to be in reciprocal verbal relationships with God, with other people, and with ourselves. As pastoral theologian David Augsburger explains, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."⁸⁵ Thus in loving God we are called to listen to the words of God and speak to God in prayer. In loving others we are called to speak the truth in love to each other and to listen

⁸⁵ David Augsburger was my pastoral counseling professor at Fuller Seminary. This quote is from his book *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1982), 12.

deeply with patience and humility. And finally, we are called to love ourselves—to repeat words of life to ourselves and listen to the words that are on our own hearts.⁸⁶

In addition to engaging in loving language-based relationships, we are also called by God to speak about our faith. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that we come to know and understand things better when we talk about them. We use language to organize our thoughts so that new understandings can emerge and we can discover truth.⁸⁷ Thus our own voice is a necessary component in the process of any sort of growth and development, especially in the process of spiritual growth and faith development. Homiletician Thomas G. Long explains that “trying to put our faith into words is a part of discovering what we know about God, believe about God, and trust about God.”⁸⁸

Walter Brueggemann looks at the process of spiritual growth in his book *Belonging and Growing in Christian Community*. He suggests that spiritual growth consists of embracing God’s story and coming to see it as our own. He outlines the following steps as crucial in this process: receiving the story, hearing the story, celebrating the story and telling the story, until we finally become the story ourselves.⁸⁹ As you can see, spiritual growth begins when a person receives the story by hearing, but listening is only part of learning. In addition to receiving the words of others, we must reflect on the words we have received and put what we have learned into our own words.

⁸⁶ Julie Short, speech/language pathologist, emphasized the importance of language for self-regulation.

⁸⁷ Short, interview.

⁸⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 6.

⁸⁹ Walter Brueggemann and Elizabeth McWhorter, *Belonging and Growing in the Christian Community* (Atlanta: Christian Education, 1979).

The learning cycle is complete when we can synthesize what we have learned, make it our own, and then communicate that to others.

Verbal creatures that we are, the ability to articulate something actually shapes our world. Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton explore this idea in their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. They describe philosopher Charles Taylor's belief that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality. "So, for instance, religious faith, practice and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. Articulacy fosters reality."⁹⁰ So when we talk about our faith, we are not merely expressing our beliefs, but we are becoming a person who believes more deeply in the mysteries of God and understands better what it means to be a follower of Christ. Whether we are interpreting a passage of scripture, or recounting stories from our daily life with God, speaking about faith has the power to change us. Long explains it this way:

In the same way, to speak truthfully about God is also to enter into a world, a world in which God is present and can be trusted. To speak about God is to live in that world and to speak out of it. To speak about God is to be in relationship to God, which means that speaking about God is more than speaking *about* God; it is also speaking for, in, with and to God. Authentic speech about God, therefore, can be said to be a form of prayer.⁹¹

It is helpful to think of Christian speech in terms of testimony. A testimony is simply giving witness to what we have seen and heard. While we tend to think of religious testimonies in a more narrow sense of someone sharing their conversion story,

⁹⁰ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 267-268. See Charles Taylor, "Self Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45-76.

⁹¹ Long, *Testimony*, 11.

I'd like to make the case that all speech that proclaims the truth of God and the gospel is a form of testimony. And while Christian speech happens in many places and situations, there is a special form of speech that happens in the context of the worshipping church. When the community comes together in Christian worship, the truths of the faith are stated and reaffirmed by all present. Those who stand before the gathered assembly and speak words of faith are sharing their testimony. They are proclaiming with their bodies and their minds and their voices that they believe that what they are saying is true and important. Every person who speaks of God serves as a witness to the truth of which they speak. Thus, when we read scripture we are attesting to the significance of the words we are reading. When we pray publicly we are declaring that we believe in a God who listens and cares. When we sing we are professing that God is great and worthy of praise. And when we preach, we are simply sharing the testimony of what we have seen and heard. Like Peter and John in the 4th chapter of Acts, we are saying to anyone who will listen "It's up to you to determine whether it's right before God to obey you rather than God. As for us, we can't stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19b-20).

This is why it can be so powerful and emotional to speak in a worship service. The most competent professionals find their voices trembling as they read the words of the gospel before the gathered community. And the opportunity to share a five minute reflection can change the life of the person who speaks, as well as the lives of those who hear. If we remember back to the beginning of the church we recall that it was the Holy Spirit of God who empowered the people to speak. If that same Spirit is empowering us today, then we should not be surprised by the spiritual power we experience. Speaking, especially in the context of the worship of the church, is a holy activity—one in which

the mind of the individual and the Spirit of God unite and find expression through the human voice.

Sometimes we find ourselves arguing about who has the authority to speak in church. If we can understand that all speech in worship is a form of testimony, we will see that the authority to speak does not lie in human office or influence, but rather in the Spirit of God who gives us the authority to speak. As theologian Anna Carter Florence explains, “the tradition of testimony shifts the locus of authority away from the ministerial office and places it with the one who testifies: that is, the one who has seen and believed the liberating power of God’s Word and who then risks proclaiming the truth of the gospel.”⁹² Ultimately, as Christians we believe that all spiritual authority comes from the Holy Spirit. The voice that speaks through the power of the Holy Spirit derives “its authority from the ongoing divine conversation.”⁹³ When Christians speak of God it is “because they hear the voice of God, they breathe the Spirit that cannot be contained, and they find that their voices offer a unique, unmistakable, essential tone to the sound of God’s liberation of the world.”⁹⁴

As we have seen the importance of the spoken word in scripture and in the whole of the Christian faith, we can begin to understand the spiritual danger inherent in silencing a person whom God has called to speak. Unfortunately many individuals and groups of people have been silenced in the name of God. Many churches in our present day still prohibit all women from authoritative speech in worship. Women are excluded

⁹² Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xxvi.

⁹³ Turner and Hudson, 51-52.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

from sharing public prayers, scripture readings, sermons, even personal testimonies or announcements. Given the centrality of speech to the Christian faith, we must understand that those who are silenced are truly pushed away from the spiritual growth and manifestation of faith that God desires for all people. And anytime a person's God-given, spirit-empowered voice is silenced, it is the Holy Spirit of the living God that is being quenched. My grandmother likes to say that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread." I believe that this saying is appropriate in this context. Silencing anyone is a very serious spiritual matter. The church must be very careful to never foolishly rush in and silence those whom God has called to speak.

The Courage to Speak

I played a little tennis when I was a young girl but never played consistently enough to really become good. I had the basic strokes down so when I started playing in my thirties I knew enough to have fun and begin to improve. I appreciated the chance to get some exercise and I also enjoyed the social interaction. I knew it was good for my body and mind to learn new skills involving coordination, strength and endurance. But there was one part of tennis that surprised me.

I play doubles. This means that I am always playing with a partner. The main reason we play doubles is that it's cheaper for four people to split the cost of the court and the coach than it is for two people. But for me, playing doubles has taught me something that I've carried far beyond the court. Our coaches continually encourage us to communicate on the tennis court. "Call it! Talk to each other!" When the tennis ball is coming toward us we are supposed to make a split second judgment as to which player is going to try to get it. If I think I can get the ball I am supposed to shout "mine!" And if my partner thinks she can get it she is supposed to do the same thing. If I think it's too far

away for me I'm supposed to shout "yours!" to indicate my hope that she will be able to receive and return the shot. Sometimes things on the tennis court get really crazy and one person will yell "switch!" This means that she is moving forward and to the opposite side of the court to try to get the ball, and as her partner I should cover her original space.

The funny thing is, for me this is the hardest part of tennis. Forehand, backhand, serves, volleys, footwork—these are all parts of tennis I can practice and learn. My body will possibly improve, albeit slowly and with natural limitations, if I practice. But the use of language on the tennis court is not about my body. It is about my mind and my heart. You see, if I speak I make myself vulnerable. When I shout "mine" I am telling my partner that she should rely on me to get the ball. And the truth is, I might get the ball and I might not. By speaking I have opened myself up to responsibility and to criticism. When I shout "yours" I am asking someone else to do something for me. What if she can't get the ball? What if she thinks I should have gone for it, and not asked her to get it? By speaking I run the risk of being seen as unreasonable, or selfish, or domineering. And I risk messing up the game for myself and my partner—which is why, for years I didn't follow the coaches' instructions to talk to my partners on the tennis court. I felt worried that I would say the wrong thing and my words would cause confusion and harm. But they continued to explain that I needed to talk. I needed to take the risk and call the ball—"mine," "yours," "switch!" My game would never really improve if I wasn't willing to speak.

It's easier to be quiet. Speaking is risky! It's safer to not say anything. But if we are going to learn, if we are going to grow, we have to be willing to speak. As I ran around the tennis court gathering the confidence and courage to shout at my partner, I

thought about how church is similar to tennis. Even if a woman is allowed to speak, it is so much safer to stay silent. If she speaks she might offend someone. She might end up saying something silly or embarrassing or even untrue! Even though she is allowed to speak, finding the motivation and courage to do so is not easy.

When a woman has spent her whole life believing that it would be sinful for her to speak in church, when she has been reminded over and over again that God is calling her to silence, she very well may continue to feel uncomfortable even if her church changes and begins to invite her to use her voice in worship. She may also feel conflicted. She may want her church to value the voices of women, deeply desiring for the voices of her daughters and friends to be heard, but it may continue to “feel wrong” for herself. As women we internalize all of the arguments against our participation and those emotions don’t simply disappear just because the rules have been changed. We worry about how others will react to us. We wonder if people will see us as self-important, controlling, egotistical or rebellious. We also feel guilty when we think of women who have gone before us, serving God faithfully and never speaking a word in church. If they served God in silence, we wonder why we think we need to speak.

In addition to our emotional conflicts, we also have very practical concerns. We lack training and experience, so we feel nervous and awkward. And many of us share the common human fear of public speaking. As Jerry Seinfeld astutely observed, “According to most studies, people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a

funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.”⁹⁵ Public speaking is intimidating even without theological and emotional baggage.

Making any sort of change is difficult. Just because women have been given permission to speak in church, they don't necessarily have the motivation and courage necessary to do something completely new and different. Being told that the restrictions have been lifted is not the same as learning that they have been invited into something that is good and important. If women are going to have the courage to step into roles that have always been forbidden for them, they are going to need to understand that they are being invited to participate in something that is important and good and powerful. They need to hear the voice of God calling them into these new roles. If they can believe that it is God who is calling them to speak and that by speaking they are actually participating in the very work of salvation, then they might be able to find the courage to answer the call to do something new and different, unlike anything they have ever done before.

⁹⁵ Jerry Weissman, “Another Humorous View on the Fear of Public Speaking,” *Forbes Magazine Online*, June 17, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerryweissman/2014/06/17/another-humorous-view-on-the-fear-of-public-speaking/#30156da06708> (accessed February 2, 2018).

CHAPTER FOUR: WOMEN OF COLOR CALLED TO SPEAK

In this section of my research I want to look at how women of color are navigating a call to ministry in a Church of Christ context, and how they can be adequately supported in order to continue their pursuit of this divine vocation. In order to do this we must recognize how deeply the combination of patriarchy and white supremacy has shaped the Churches of Christ throughout our history. The unity so valued by the Restoration Movement was undermined by a pervasive white supremacy that led to a corrosive racist theology in the church. While there were African Americans in Stone-Campbell churches from the earliest days,⁹⁶ it was not long before the Churches of Christ were purposefully segregated into black churches and white churches. Many black churches were planted and funded by white churches who did not want to grant black Christians full membership. As time went on, black preachers were not allowed into church-affiliated educational institutions to further their theological training. The result has been that the majority of Black Churches of Christ today are theologically restrictive, tending toward dogmatism. As Tanya Smith Brice, author of *Reconciliation Reconsidered: Advancing the National Conversation on Race in Churches of Christ*, explains, “Black Churches of Christ were intentionally planted by avowed white supremacists to maintain a class of subservience among southern Blacks. This, combined with a forbidding of theological training of Black church leaders who were put in place

⁹⁶ Foster, *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 11.

by Whites, has resulted in a spiritually deformed Church.”⁹⁷ Black Churches of Christ today do not permit women to take on authoritative leadership roles. Women may teach other women, but the opportunities simply do not exist for women to answer a call to pastoral ministry and preaching.⁹⁸

This is not to say that women in black churches are passive. Quite to the contrary, there is a heritage of strength and independence among the women. As my friend Kimberly Hebert Gregory explains,

When I think of growing up as a woman, Black and in the Church of Christ, I think of many things, but a lack of input and voice is not one of them. The Black women who taught me the Bible in the Church of Christ never seemed to see themselves as victims in their religious experience. They shared the gospel with us fully, beautifully, freely...as a true liberation narrative. The women who taught me in our “Girls Bible classes” taught me how to ask deep questions of the Bible, to see how Christ loved and respected women and how to explore my femininity and sexuality through Christ in freedom, all while not under the gaze of male Christian judgment. These teachers and mothers gave me the liberation song that they could not sing. They had the score and knew how to orchestrate and plant the seeds of Black Christian feminist thought. That was not their intent or language, but they knew their own power within the system and they used it.⁹⁹

It is this exact heritage of strength and conviction that sets the stage for a spiritual and religious crisis when a woman in a Black Church of Christ senses God calling her to a ministry that stretches beyond the boundaries of women’s ministry. Since opportunities simply don’t exist in at this point in time for women to preach and lead in Black Churches of Christ, women either have to stay in the church and focus their energy on leading women and children, or they have to find an alternate spiritual home from which

⁹⁷ Tanya Smith Brice, interview with author, December 15, 2017.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Kimberly Hebert Gregory, interview with author, December 15, 2017.

to answer God's call to ministry. Leaving means separating themselves from the tradition and heritage that taught them about God and gave them their faith; it also means separating themselves from a rich cultural heritage shaped by loved ones who were subject to great oppression.

The black church in America has always been a place where oppressed people could escape their oppressors and the persecution they faced in the other spaces in their lives. Their religious culture was influenced by sacred African traditions and the stories of suffering and survival from their enslaved ancestors. From plantation congregations made entirely of enslaved people,¹⁰⁰ through the years of Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement, the black church has been a place of safety in the midst of the storm.

Discrimination and hatred may have filled their daily lives, but in the church they were treated with respect and dignity, called "brother" and "sister," "deacon" and "pastor." Not only was the church a place of refuge, but the gospel was interpreted in a way that gave meaning to their suffering. Theologian James Cone explains this in his landmark book

The Cross and the Lynching Tree:

That God could "make a way out of no way" in Jesus' cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. Christ crucified manifested God's loving and liberating presence *in* the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that *ultimately*, in God's eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the "troubles of this world," no matter how great and painful their suffering. Believing this paradox, this absurd claim of faith, was only possible through God's "amazing grace" and the gift of faith, grounded in humility and repentance. There was no place for the proud and the mighty, for people who think that God called them to rule over others. The cross

¹⁰⁰ Newell, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*, 48.

was God's critique of power—white power—with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.”¹⁰¹

It is never an easy decision or process to leave the church that raised you, and it's even harder to choose to separate oneself from such an important cultural and spiritual heritage. This is one of the reasons there are very few black women pursuing seminary education and vocational ministry in the Churches of Christ. But it is not the only reason. Women of color continue to face more obstacles than white women do when it comes to following their vocational calling. Social, financial and educational privilege opens doors for white women more often and in more places than for women of color. Thus a group like the Community of Women ministers, women pursuing vocational ministry in Churches of Christ, is more than 90% white. This is true even though most white people would describe their churches and educational institutions to be “diverse” and “interracial.” The truth is that white supremacy is woven into every aspect of our lives as Americans. It is present in our congregations, in our belief systems, and in our own minds. As Kimberly explained to me, “White supremacy is very active. It is not just in society, it is in the mind. It is in the unchallenged belief system. The renewing of the mind is the call for white churches and women.”¹⁰² Because of the pervasive continuing realities of white supremacy, women of color who are called to ministry must navigate not only patriarchy but multiple interlocking systems of oppression.¹⁰³

I am continually amazed at how the Spirit of God continues to speak and call girls and women to roles of spiritual leadership and ministry, even in the most theologically

¹⁰¹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 2.

¹⁰² Gregory, interview.

¹⁰³ Tabitha Jones Jolivet, interview with author, December 19, 2017. The language of black women negotiating “multiple systems of interlocking oppression” is from sociologist Patricia Hill Collins.

restrictive and male-dominated environments. The God who gave life to Sarah's barren womb will continue to breathe life into the places we least expect. As such, it is important for white women pursuing ministry in Churches of Christ to not become so focused on our own obstacles that we forget our sisters who face even more. As white women called to ministry, we do experience discrimination, bias and prejudice. This puts us in a position to be able to hear the stories and learn from those who bear the scars of oppression far greater than ours. All women in ministry have the opportunity to truly support each other, bridging the gulfs of race and class, connecting through a shared experience of being the unlikely ones that God has called.

We must make no assumptions about each other. Rather we must remember that each of us is unique and has an individual story to tell. Our belief in the incarnation underscores the truth that our bodies matter. We believe in a God who values the flesh and blood experience of human beings so much that this God left the heavenly dwelling places and put on skin to dwell with human beings. Because of the incarnation we believe that all bodies matter, that the spirit of God truly dwells in our earthly bodies empowering us to be the hands and feet of Jesus, the body of Christ. Sara Robb is a seminary-educated woman of Hispanic heritage. She grew up in the Churches of Christ and is one of the pastors for a Baptist church in Georgia. She explained it this way,

I think that women of color in the Churches of Christ need to hear that their voices matter. That their bodies matter, not as a symbol of "godly womanhood," whatever that is, but that bodies matter as vessels in which all the humanity of Christ in its complex messiness dwells and finds unique expression. And that expression is Christ as incarnation, to use minorities who are often oppressed because of the color of their skin or identifying factors that could cast them into a group that faces systematic oppression to be unexpected reversers of oppression in which minority is a blessing, color is a social construct that becomes redeemed in the inclusive kingdom work of God, and that the female voice is powerful and poetic

prophecy to a world that seems to have forgotten that it was a woman who said “here am I, let it be unto me as you have said” and thus brought God incarnate into the world.¹⁰⁴

In the Christian story God repeatedly calls the poor and the meek to lead those of high worldly esteem in the way of righteousness. As Sara explained, the voices of women, especially women of color, testify, physically, visibly, vocally, to the redemptive message of the gospel. Thus all who are committed to seeking the Kingdom should place high priority on empowering women of color for the ministry of the gospel. Feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp has said that when women preach, “proclamation leaves its ecclesial prison.”¹⁰⁵ How much truer is this when women of color authoritatively speak words of life to the worshipping community.

Thus we must ask how we can best support women of color who have been called to ministry in the context of the Churches of Christ. As I discussed this question with wise women who have walked this or similar journeys,¹⁰⁶ I learned the following:

- 1) We must fight to defeat white supremacy in our churches, in our communities and in our nation. The closer we come to embracing an authentic creational equality, the more opportunities there will be for women to hear and heed God’s call to ministry.
- 2) We must resist a legalistic theological framework that emphasizes doctrinal purity and relies on correct interpretation and practice for salvation. As Dr. Irie L.

¹⁰⁴ Sara Robb, interview with author, December 14, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 4.

¹⁰⁶ I’d like to express my deepest appreciation to the brilliant women who helped me think through this chapter and develop these recommendations: Marisol Babcock, Tanya Brice, Spring Cooke, Shannon Harris, Kimberly Herbert Gregory, Karon Johnson, Tabitha Jones Jolivet, Angela Ravin-Anderson, Irie Session, and Sara Robb.

Session explains in the book *One Church: A Bicentennial Celebration of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address*, “the exclusivism of the Churches of Christ creates within the black church a culture of sexism—giving its leaders a feeling of both doctrinal and male superiority.”¹⁰⁷ While Dr. Session is discussing the black church, the point is critically important for white churches who are seeking to navigate a new path of ecumenism within the Church of Christ heritage.

Exclusivism is about drawing lines, determining who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is damned. Exclusivism crushes the spirit and in no way resembles the expansive gospel of Jesus Christ. We must continually reexamine our theology, remembering the steadfast love of our gracious creator which is at the heart of the gospel. The Disciples of Christ, the spiritual cousins of the Churches of Christ who embraced a grace-oriented and inclusive gospel, have ordained many women pastors of all different many races. The gospel of grace opens doors for many to use their gifts to the glory of God.

- 3) We must create space for women to increase their skills and experience in preaching, teaching and leadership. Churches that are committed to a truly inclusive representation of the gospel must make space in their schedules and in their budgets to equip women for leadership, and intentionally seek out women of color with pastoral gifts.¹⁰⁸
- 4) We must recognize that the journey can be lonely for women of color, many of whom have left the churches of their childhood in search of a faith community

¹⁰⁷ Irie L. Session, “The Problem of Full Communion,” in *One Church: A Bicentennial Celebration of Thomas Campbell's Declaration & Address*, ed. Thomas. Glenn, Douglas A. Foster, and Clinton J. Holloway, 93-103 (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2008), 98-99.

¹⁰⁸ Spring Cooke, interview with author, December 13, 2017.

that will support them in ministry. We live in a culture that encourages women to compete for the one seat that is available at the table, but we must resist this temptation and passionately seek to encourage, support and promote one another. As women called by God to ministry, we share not only our faith but a sacred vocation. We must commit ourselves to humble friendship with those who are like us and those who are not.

In addition to supporting women of color who God has called to ministry, white women would do well to recognize the resource that is available to them in their sisters of color. They should seek out opportunities to listen to women of color and learn from the wisdom they have gained through generations of hard-fought experience. Our sisters of color learned the realities of prejudice and discrimination at a very young age. Their parents and grandparents taught them how to survive and thrive in a hostile environment, and they practice these skills daily. As Kimberly explained to me, “subversion and resistance is deeply embedded in Black American historical culture and religion.”¹⁰⁹ Because of this heritage and lived experience, women of color have what Dr. Session describes as an “epistemological advantage.” White women are wise to seek out women of color as friends and companions on the journey toward justice and equality.

Finally, we should recognize the powerful opportunity we have to seek peace, true biblical *shalom*, through loving friendships between white women and women of color. Women who are truly different—different races, different classes, different educational levels—have the potential to come together as partners, co-laborers with each other and

¹⁰⁹ Gregory, interview.

God in the work of salvation. But we must work hard to have authentic friendships. We must do the spiritual work of truly listening to each other and sharing our stories.

Leslie Walker is an undergraduate student at Lipscomb University. She wrote a piece under the heading of “Learning to Tell Our Stories,” reflecting on her identity as an African-American girl in a white culture. She presented her paper at the Christian Scholars Conference in June of 2017. Her paper includes these poignant words:

I want to be loved and accepted without having to ask. But I also understand that I know as little about what it is to be white, as white people know what it is to be black.

I have come to understand that ignorance is impossible to avoid. We are all different beings, with different skin and lives and thoughts. I will never know what it’s like to be in someone else’s skin, I will only know what it’s like to be in mine.

The best I can do is ask for your story and wait for you to ask for mine.

And even though my heart runs frantic through my chest, even though my legs itch to run and body shakes, I pray that someone asks. Because when I force myself to answer, I force myself to face the world as I am.

I fear that God made me this way for a reason. I fear that I was born in this age, looking like this, being who I am, because the world needed to learn something from a life like mine. I fear that He has chosen me to speak, while I have spent my life taping my mouth shut and biting my tongue.¹¹⁰

If we can come together in authentic friendships, asking for each other’s stories, truly listening and learning from each other, we have the potential to lead the way for the church to witness and experience the gospel’s radical vision of unity. Through our humble and sincere partnership we have the potential to reveal the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God in all of its bright, beautiful colors.

¹¹⁰ Leslie Walker, “Words,” October 18, 2016. Used with permission.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

My ministry project was built upon the research detailed in the previous three chapters. The overall goal of the project was to examine the needs of women in ecumenical Churches of Christ at this point in history, and to creatively consider ways to provide the support they need to continue working for change in the church. Specific attention was to be given to the needs of women who are pursuing a path into professional ministry. A full description and evaluation of the project is outlined below, organized according to the goals set out in the proposal.

Awareness Raising

Goal 1: To educate members and leaders of the Churches of Christ as to a theological and scriptural basis for women's full participation and to increase the awareness among leaders of the Churches of Christ as to the urgent need to support women leaders in the denomination.

I have been able to address this goal in a variety of ways. In May 2017 I was privileged to be a keynote preacher at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures, assigned to preach on the story of Esther.¹¹¹ I used this opportunity to affirm God's call to women to engage in authoritative speech. My sermon was about Esther but ultimately the message was about how all women, all people for that matter, are called by God to authoritatively speak words of life. This sermon was preached in front of a large live audience and is available online in video as well as audio formats for people who did not attend the event.

¹¹¹ See Appendix D for Esther Sermon.

In early 2018 I have had the opportunity to write for the *Charis* online journal. I have written three pieces with the intention of helping people to understand the multifaceted effects of limiting the role of women in the church.¹¹² The first is titled “The Women’s Issue.” This piece is a detailed exploration of how we describe the subject of sexism and gender equality in the church, and how it is misleading to label it a “women’s issue.” The issue isn’t only about women and is not uniquely for women. I point out that limiting women hurts men and women of all ages and cripples the mission of the church. The second piece is a reflection entitled “A Mother Always Worries,” illustrating the contrast between the true dangers present in the world for girls, with the dangers we create by not allowing girls to flourish spiritually in a church context. The third piece, “Before the Throne of God Above,” tells the story of a woman speaking in church for the first time. It illustrates how significant this seemingly small step is for her, for her children and for the congregation. These pieces have not been posted on the website yet but should be posted in the next few months.

The next portion of my awareness raising goal is specific to the needs of women in ministry. In June 2017 I had the opportunity to present an essay at the Christian Scholars Conference at Lipscomb University entitled “The Glass Pulpit.”¹¹³ In this essay I explored how graduate ministry programs at Church of Christ colleges and universities are opening and welcoming toward women, actively recruiting them as students in their programs. I held this in contrast to the lack of women in pastoral leadership in our congregations. I pointed out that unless our churches make significant changes and begin

¹¹² See Appendix E for “The Women’s Issue,” “A Mother Always Worries,” and “Before the Throne of God Above.”

¹¹³ See Appendix F for “The Glass Pulpit.”

truly opening doors for women in positions of empowered leadership, our educational institutions are training women to minister in other denominations.

I included a theological awareness raising component in the 2017 Conference for Women Ministers. In the Tuesday afternoon session, New Testament scholar Dr. Thomas Robinson taught a class entitled “A Community Without Barriers.”¹¹⁴ In this class he presented a biblical theology of the full equality of women. Although most women who are pursuing ministry believe that scripture supports their call, there are still doubts that linger, especially when critics point to the Bible to support their perspective. Since a patriarchal interpretation of the Bible is so ingrained in our thinking, we must be reminded over and over again of a new and different understanding.

I was also sought to raise awareness regarding the Community of Women Ministers. It was important to help the members of the group to understand the purpose of the group and the intended audience. I also encouraged them to take a sense of ownership of the group, to share the mission with others, and to invites others to join.¹¹⁵ My goal was not only to increase the membership of the group, but also to share the message with people who might be willing to financially support our efforts. The fundraising letter I wrote was an additional educational piece, articulating the purpose of the group and a rationale for supporting our efforts.

Evaluation of Goal 1: The success of this goal will be measured by the response I receive, specifically in willingness to support the goals of the Community of Women Ministers. I will have been successful if we have been able to secure sufficient finances to fund our annual conference for the next five years.

¹¹⁴ Much of Dr. Robinson’s work is available online at www.communitywithoutbarriers.com.

¹¹⁵ See Appendix G for Facebook post.

As I evaluate the success of the goal to raise awareness, I've determined that significant progress has been made in the area of raising awareness. However, some of the awareness raising came from the activities described above, but some of the awareness raising happened through other parts of the project.

The publications and sermon I outlined above all contributed to raising awareness in their own ways. The Esther sermon was a significant component of awareness raising. The event was very public and there was extra attention brought to it because I was only the second woman to preach a keynote sermon in that context. The video of the sermon has been viewed almost 700 times and a transcript of the sermon will be published in an issue of *Leaven Journal* later this year. I received positive feedback from many people, both in person and in writing. One person wrote the following: "I just listened to your sermon on Esther. AMAZING!!! Amy, I thank the Spirit within that spoke truth about Esther, human trafficking, racial hatred, female exploitation, and crises."

I attempted to raise awareness regarding women pursuing ministry in the Churches of Christ through "The Glass Pulpit" paper. In the paper I clearly articulated the state of the current crisis; however, the session was small and was not recorded. The paper has not yet been published but there are plans to publish it in the near future. Thus it helped to raise awareness in a small circle. I hope it will be used to raise awareness more in the future as the message it contains is extremely important. The pieces I've written for *Charis* have the potential to effectively raise awareness, since *Charis* is an online journal for Abilene Christian University, one of the leading voices for the ecumenical Churches of Christ.

I successfully raised the theological awareness among women ministers through Dr. Robinson's class. Since an egalitarian theology must be reinforced again and again, we must remember to revisit it often in the future. I was also successful in helping CWM members to grow in their understanding of the purpose, audience and mission of the group. This is evidenced by the fact that ten women voiced their intention to organize women ministers in their area and five events have been planned by someone other than me in the past six months. The Facebook group membership has increased by 20 percent in the last six months. Financially, we were able to raise enough money to support the 2017 and 2018 conferences. While we don't have funding secured at this point for future conferences, we have some very strong leads. I feel confident that we will be able to meet the goal of funding for five conferences, and I have high hopes that we will have enough money to fund even more projects.

The challenge going forward is to continually rearticulate the message. We are working to change deeply held beliefs and practices, thus it is so easy for people to fall back into their old, more comfortable, ways of thinking. Even the women who are pursuing ministry are subject to the tendency to fall into previous theological and emotional patterns, forgetting the legitimacy of their call and the importance of using their gifts in the church. They must be reminded again and again of a theological narrative that affirms the role of women in ministry and the creativity of the Spirit's work in the world.

Community Formation

Goal 2: To increase the strength of community among women who are leaders and clergy in the Church of Christ through a re-envisioning the Women in Ministry Network.

As I outlined in my introduction, the Women in Ministry Network began in the early 2000s to bring together women ministers in the Churches of Christ. We began holding annual conferences in 2005. While these gatherings were consistently fun and meaningful, we also consistently suffered from low attendance and confusion regarding our intended purpose and audience. One of the major components of my demonstration project involved examining the role of the organization, and specifically the annual conference, in the lives of women pursuing ministry in the Churches of Christ. I approached the challenge of revisiting and reviving the Women in Ministry Network one step at a time.

The first step involved taking the temperature of the group to see if women generally valued the group's presence. Through telephone, face to face, email and Facebook conversations, the answers were a strong "yes." Time and again women expressed their appreciation for the Women in Ministry Network, explaining how meaningful it had been to come to know other women ministers in the Churches of Christ. It was clear that this group, even if it continued to exist only as an online community, was doing something that was not being done anywhere else and it needed to continue. There had been an informal leadership team in place which met in early 2013; however, this group had not spoken in nearly three years. I felt as though the members of the team might be ready to hand the leadership on to a new generation of leaders so I reached out to each of them explaining my project. They gave me their blessing to revamp the network with an eye toward the future.

The next step involved examining the make-up of the group. The primary question I considered was that of "professional ministry"—is this a group that should

exist primarily to support those who are approaching ministry as a professional endeavor, or should we widen our circle and intentionally bring in lay leaders? As I've mentioned previously, this entire discussion continues to be semantically tricky because the Churches of Christ do not recognize a clergy/laity distinction. Many churches assert the belief, even in official church publications, that "all members of the congregation" are ministers. Thus there is something in the discussion of ministry as a profession that offends the *priesthood of all believers* sensibility that is deeply embedded in our history and theology.

Additionally, I felt concerned for women leaders in the Churches of Christ who have taken on new roles in the context of changing churches. These women are doing something their mothers and grandmothers never did and many feel that pressure and are in need of support. However, the current Women in Ministry group is made of women either studying ministry at the seminary level or working/looking for work as members of the pastoral staff of a church. While there are perhaps many struggles these women ministers share with lay leaders, there are also many concerns, questions and predicaments that are unique to a pastoral calling. These unique concerns make up the bulk of the conversations that takes place in the Facebook group. I was concerned that broadening the scope of the group would result in a loss of the commonality that has made the group successful. While the needs of female lay leaders who are taking on nontraditional roles are very important and must be addressed, we concluded that this would not be best achieved by adding them into the group for women ministers. Perhaps another group could be designed to bring support to lay leaders.

The next step involved restating the unique purpose of the group for women ministers and reexamining the name of the group. Male ministers from the Churches of Christ have come together for generations to support each other in professional ministry. Generally their meetings are called “preacher’s luncheons,” thus the target audience is clear. However, since we are in a time of jumbled transition, the titles and roles for women in ministry are not clear. Some women are called ministers and others are not. Some are paid and others are not. Of those who are *not* paid, some are working as volunteers hoping that eventually they will be able to move onto a church’s payroll in the future, while others are perfectly satisfied to function in an unpaid capacity. Some have seminary educations and others do not. Of those who are not educated, some are hoping to find a way to engage in education and training, while others have no interest. Some women have a sense of pastoral identity and calling, seeing themselves as called to pastoral ministry even if they are not currently serving a church, while others have never thought of themselves as called to ministry, rather they simply ended up in a paid or volunteer ministry position and are trying to do the job well.

Another complicating factor has to do with the limited opportunities available for women to find pastoral work in Churches of Christ. As I wrestled with the current dynamics in conversations with colleagues and peers, I noticed that women who choose to leave the Churches of Christ to do ministry in another denominational context often feel that they are no longer welcome in Church of Christ circles. I realized furthermore, to my great distress, that this dynamic was true for our group as well. Women who were worshiping or working in different denominations felt that they were not legitimate members of our group – that it was a requirement for the group members to be active

members of Churches of Christ. It was urgent that this situation be addressed. Given the reality of the Churches of Christ for women at this time in history, we absolutely had to intentionally embrace women ministers who chose to leave the denomination.

I began to remind people that “you can take the girl out of the Church of Christ, but you can’t take the Church of Christ out of the girl!” Given the hundreds of Church of Christ women who are preparing to be ministers, and the extremely few ministry positions available to them in the Churches of Christ, we must assume that a good percentage of the members of our group will at some point leave the Churches of Christ either temporarily or permanently. However, it is my firm conviction that leaving with the loving support of those you have left, is very different than leaving without any support. It became clear to me that our group of women ministers could serve the purpose of healing for women who have to make the painful decision to leave our fellowship in order to serve elsewhere. While many circles in the Churches of Christ may reject them, as women likewise called to ministry, we can continue to embrace each other.

In an effort to get a handle on how to effectively communicate the mission and purpose of the group to the various constituents, I met with my friend Kenny Eicher, Vice President and Executive Creative Director at The CSI Group, a creative marketing agency in New Jersey. He helped me to think through the language. Given the many permutations of women in ministry in the Churches of Christ at this point in history, we determined that the best course of action was to be as clear as possible in the language describing the group, then allow women to self-select based on that language. We decided that it would be beneficial to change the name of the group to “Community of Women Ministers.” Kenny pointed out that “network” is a word that has become dated,

associated with the early 2000s, the beginning years of the internet. “Community” is a word that better describes the character and intention of the group. The choice of the word “Ministers,” rather than the phrase “in ministry,” helps to bring together women who feel comfortable claiming the title “minister” for themselves. Finally the phrase “significant ties to the Churches of Christ” communicated a fluidity regarding denominational loyalty and church membership. The description of the Facebook group was updated using the following language:

We are a community of women with significant ties to the Churches of Christ who are called to ministry. This is a space for supportive conversation. Our goal is to provide companionship, encouragement and blessing to women who are called to ministry.

Our members include women in a wide variety of ministry roles: ministers, seminary students, chaplains, educators, spiritual directors, missionaries, writers, leaders of parachurch ministries and more!

Some are currently employed, some are giving their time as volunteers, some are looking for work, and others are taking a break from professional ministry for family or other reasons.

Some of our women currently work for a Church of Christ. Others grew up in the Church of Christ but are in ministry elsewhere. Some have one foot in the Church of Christ and one foot somewhere else. Some are in the process of looking around and just aren’t sure where they will end up. We all have “significant ties” to the Churches of Christ and a desire to support other women on a similar journey.

Having clarified a vision for the group, I turned my attention to new strategies for community development. One of the strategies outlined in my proposal is to use technology to bring women together in innovative ways to help them make supportive connections with each other in spite of the barriers of time and space. In April 2017 I introduced the “Companions on the Journey” project.¹¹⁶ I invited women to indicate if

¹¹⁶ See Appendix H.

they would like to be paired up with a partner for the months of May through July. The goal was for each pair to speak on the phone for about 30 minutes at least once every two weeks over the course of three months. I would pair them up then introduce them to their partners over email. I encouraged them to discuss ministry situations, vocational issues, theological questions and prayer requests during their phone calls, and to pray for each other, either on the phone or off the phone. I described it as an experiment, believing that the Holy Spirit brings people together in ways we could never orchestrate. Twenty-six women signed up and participated in the project.

For the next step, I turned my attention to the topic of our annual conference. In conversations with women in the Facebook group, as well as with those who have attended past conferences, it was evident that there is tremendous support for continuing the conference. But there are also significant obstacles that prohibit women from attending the conference. Time and money are clearly the largest of these obstacles, but it was important to understand the specific dynamics regarding both time and money that would keep women from being able to attend the conference.

Time away from families and time away from work appeared to be the most prevalent of the obstacles regarding time. This is especially relevant given the fact that many women are the primary caregivers for their young children. The issues regarding time away from work focused specifically on vacation Bible schools, summer camps and other big events that the minister simply could not miss. Money was an obstacle since the majority of the women who would attend our conferences did not receive any sort of continuing education budget from their churches or institutions. Thus all conference expenses were paid out of the pocket of the woman herself. In addition to travel expenses

and conference fees, often she is paying for extra babysitting for her children in her absence.

While the obstacles of time and money seem fairly self-evident, the truth is that people are resourceful and find the time and money to do the things that are important to them. It's not so much that women don't have enough time and money to attend the conference, but rather that the conference for women ministers was not prioritized highly enough for women to choose to attend. For the conferences to continue and be successful, we had to understand what would make them valuable enough so that women would want to attend and choose to spend their limited time and money in that way.

For women ministers or ministry students, a strong incentive to attend a conference is an invitation to speak, teach or preach. As a rule, those with pastoral inclinations are always excited for an opportunity to share their gifts with a receptive audience. Thus the more women we can invite to be a part of the program, the more women we will have in attendance. Of course this can be achieved more effectively if there is funding available to help offset travel expenses for the women who are speaking. Women will also be motivated to attend a conference if the theme is compelling or there is an exciting lineup of speakers. Even more compelling is the participation of a well-known speaker or author. Of course, bigger name speakers cost most money, thus again we return to the need for funding.

In the past we have relied on women to attend the conferences simply because they want to be together with other women ministers. What we've come to realize is that, while being with other women who are ministers in the Churches of Christ is an experience that most women ministers crave, it is simply not motivating enough to

compel women to attend and feel justified in making it a priority in their schedules and budgets. However, it is also important that a critical mass of women ministers attend this conference. If women do sacrifice their time and money to spend a few days with other women ministers from the Churches of Christ, but the conference is mostly women who are lay leaders from local churches, they will not feel that they received what they were promised. *The success of the conference is dependent on a critical mass of women ministers attending.* We must work to make the conference worth their valuable time. We must also find ways to ease the financial burden. Again, this indicates a need for funding.

The image of a robust, well-funded conference, focused on Church of Christ women ministers, but open and empowering also to women who are lay leaders, began to take shape. Every annual conference would need a leader and every leader would need a team. The leadership team would craft a powerful theme and invite one or more well-known speakers, as well as women ministers to participate in the program. The conferences must be planned well in advance in order to get on the speakers' calendars. Money would be raised to pay speakers' honorariums and travel expenses. Extra money would be used to subsidize conference expenses and offer travel scholarships.

With a sense of clarity regarding our purpose and goals, I got to work on the 2017 and 2018 conferences. I decided to hold the 2017 conference in New York City at the Manhattan Church of Christ where I am a minister. We had held the 2008 conference at the Manhattan Church of Christ so it was time to circle back to that location. It also gave me the opportunity to put together a prototype of a new conference. Since time was short, I was not able secure a "big name" speaker but I was able to put together an enticing program. I also went ahead and laid the groundwork for the 2018 conference. Group

members at Pepperdine University had already volunteered to host 2018 so we chose dates and reserved a well-known speaker. I then sent out letters explaining our vision and asking for donations.¹¹⁷ Tax deductible donations were made to the Manhattan Church of Christ. Between the first of April and the beginning of the conference at the end of June we were able to raise \$8700. The money was used to pay honorariums and travel expenses for the speakers, to subsidize conference expenses and travel scholarships.¹¹⁸

The conference began at 1pm on Monday, June 26, and concluded at 3pm on Wednesday, June 28. The theme was “Ministers of Reconciliation” and the program included speakers from New York City as well as other parts of the country. Two of the speakers were male, while the other six were female. Approximately thirty women attended the conference from out of town and an additional thirty local women attended some or all of the sessions. The evening worship times and meals were open to men so husbands of participants and men from local congregations joined us for those. Optional lodging was offered at discounted rate at a local hotel. Breakfasts were not provided but two lunches and one dinner were catered. Dinner on the second evening was at a local Italian restaurant.¹¹⁹

Evaluation of Goal 2: The success of this goal will be measured by the number of women who are taking advantage of the various opportunities, having meaningful conversations with other women from the Church of Christ, and finding support for their journeys. I will have been successful if we have had four online community groups, four mentoring partners, and if we have Women in Ministry Network coordinators at four of our major colleges.

¹¹⁷ See fundraising letter Appendix I.

¹¹⁸ See budget Appendix J.

¹¹⁹ See conference program Appendix K.

As I evaluate the goal to strengthen the community among women who are called to ministry in the Churches of Christ, I see strong evidence of success. The process of reimagining the Community of Women Ministers was deeper and more philosophically complicated than I thought it would be. But the work paid off. I have seen evidence of engagement from women who previously sat on the fringes of the group because they weren't sure they belonged. Women who are not currently employed in ministry have been reminded that they are still important members of our group. The same has happened for women who are dabbling in different denominations or have switched denominations all together. We have the potential to build a strong community of women with significant ties to the Churches of Christ who are called to ministry, but we must remember to be intentionally inclusive, articulating a welcoming spirit again and again.

The number of women who are participating in the Community of Women Ministers, having meaningful conversations with other women from the Church of Christ, and finding support for their journeys has certainly grown in the past year. The majority of these interactions are taking place on Facebook. The Companions on the Journey project was remarkably successful at the beginning. Twenty-six women signed up to participate, thus thirteen pairs were created. Of those thirteen, about half actually connected with their partners, while the rest were unable to complete the project due to competing commitments. A few reported that the connection was extremely meaningful for them. The conference did have reasonably good attendance given the fact that it was held outside of the Bible Belt and took place during summer vacation. The 2018 conference has been planned and registration is currently taking place. We will need to be

intentional about raising money and planning these conferences well in advance in order to keep the momentum going.¹²⁰

I think we need to continue to experiment with various ways to bring women together for friendship and support. The possibilities for shorter or longer-term connections and conversations are endless. We have been successful in bringing smaller groups of women together in person for coffee or a meal at the various conferences and lectureships. This is a wonderful practice as it not only puts a face with a name for women who have developed online friendships, but it is also a nice way to introduce other women to the group.

One piece that has yet to be completed is the new website for the Community of Women ministers. I have plans to revamp the website in the next six months. In an age of social media, the Facebook group is much more important than the website, but the website still has a role and I think it is still important for the group to have a web presence. I am planning for the website to list resources available to support women ministers (CWM gatherings and conferences, job listings, therapy and coaching opportunities, etc.). It will also have contact information for women wanting to connect with other women ministers. Additionally, it will be a resource for churches that are looking for a woman minister to preach, teach, or lead a retreat or a workshop.

As we think toward the future of the Community of Women Ministers, we must also notice that the group is almost entirely white. As I've explored in Chapter 4, there are women of color with significant ties to the Churches of Christ who are longing for community and support. One woman explained it this way,

¹²⁰ See Appendix L for Guidelines for Future CWM Conferences.

“It’s great to have the Women in CoC ministry page, but I don’t believe I have ever spent time with another minister who is a woman of color. These connections are crucial for women already in ministry and for mentorship to occur for those pursuing ministry. Furthermore, I think education should occur more regularly in places like the Pepperdine Lectures to discuss or hear stories of women of color and how one could be cared for in their churches.”¹²¹

This is a challenge we cannot ignore, for the good of our sisters of color, for the good of our churches, and for the good of our world.

Finally, the challenge remains to find ways to create community for lay women who have gained a feminist awareness and are working for change in their churches. As I detailed in chapter 2, these women are carrying a heavy burden and are desperately in need of support. We need to think creatively about ways to incorporate them into the work of the Community of Women Ministers. The annual conference is one excellent opportunity. The 2017 conference gave women the option of registering as someone “attending the conference as a friend and supporter of women ministers in the Churches of Christ.” This was a way to invite lay women to participate while maintaining a clear focus for the conference. Another idea would be to create a group for women leaders, clergy as well as laity. There could be a Facebook group as well as physical gatherings. This needs to be explored further to ensure that it is complementary to the Community of Women Ministers and not competing with it. There are a variety of challenges that have yet to be explored, but it would be a worthwhile endeavor.

¹²¹ Marisol Babcock, interview with author, December 19, 2017.

Leadership Development

Goal 3: To provide opportunities for women in Churches of Christ to participate in training and equipping for leadership.

I addressed this goal of leadership development in three different ways. The first was through the online journal *Magnifications*.¹²² *Magnifications* is a website I started in 2015 as a platform for biblical reflections written by women with strong connections to the Churches of Christ. In 2017 we were able to run three different series. The first series was on the Book of Ruth. Falon Opsahl-Barton, a graduate ministry student at Pepperdine University was the guest editor. The series included four pieces and the writers were all students at Pepperdine University.

Next we ran a series in preparation for Easter 2017. The series included seven pieces, all of which focused on communion. The reflections were manuscripts that had been written to introduce and accompany the Lord's Supper in the context of an actual Sunday service. Each piece included the date and place where it had been shared. The final series celebrated Mother's Day in May of 2017. The series included three beautiful pieces celebrating motherhood in a new and surprising way. Readers were invited to reflect on the God who comforts us as a mother comforts her children (Isaiah 66:13).

Magnifications is a tool for leadership development because in most Churches of Christ women are not allowed to speak and lead in the context of worship. With the use of this online space, women can write the things they are not permitted to say out loud. We then have the opportunity to post their words on social media and share them widely. Not only do the women have the opportunity to articulate their faith and experience

¹²² www.magnifications.org

growth as a result, but the people who read the pieces have an opportunity to hear the words that are being left out of spaces that silence women.

My second strategy for leadership development happened in the context of the Community of Women Ministers. Kenny Eicher helped me to think through the need to educate people who will be ambassadors for the organization. These people must understand the mission of the organization and believe in it enough to share the message with others and invite others to be involved. In October on 2017 I posted a piece on Facebook clarifying the identity and mission of the group and asking women in the group to considering taking on leadership roles.¹²³ I explained that we were not trying to become a highly structured organization, but that we need to spread out the leadership so that we can do more and be available to more women so that our influence can extend farther than it has in the past. Nine women responded voicing their willingness to help and sharing ideas. Since that time, three smaller, local, gatherings have taken place led by some of these women.

The final strategy for leadership development was located within the Conference for Women Ministers. We determined that it was important to have an equipping element as part of every annual conference. At the 2017 conference Naomi Walters led a preaching workshop. It lasted about ninety minutes and focused on tools for the craft of preaching. We also had a workshop helping us to understand how to support women during pregnancy, labor and childbirth. Both of these were aimed at equipping women with specific tools for two very different kinds of pastoral leadership in their local churches.

¹²³ See Facebook post Appendix G.

Evaluation of Goal 3: The success of this goal will be measured by the response to these two events. Both of these events should serve as prototypes to be duplicated at other times and places. More leadership retreats will be planned for women around the country, and the expanded Women in Ministry Network will secure the funding so that we are able to meet for a conference every summer. I will have been successful if 40 women participate in the Manhattan Church of Christ retreat, with plans to repeat the retreat for 2 more churches. The Women in Ministry Network conference will be a success if we have 80 people in attendance, with at least 50% clergy.

Judging by the criteria laid out above, I was not successful at the meeting the goal of providing opportunities for women in Churches of Christ to participate in training and equipping for leadership. The Manhattan Church of Christ retreat was a wonderful weekend but the focus was not specifically on equipping. We ended up spending the weekend learning about the Book of Esther. Of course, Esther was a strong leader and there was plenty of discussion about how we are called to follow in her footsteps, but we did not learn or practice any leadership skills per se.

The idea of providing leadership retreats to lay women in the Churches of Christ is still compelling. I hope that I or someone else will be able to take on this challenge in the near future. This is a wonderful way to empower women and give them an opportunity to find their voice as a Christian leader. It is also an opportunity to intentionally empower women of color with gifts for ministry. It became evident to me that there are many details to work out that are beyond the scope of this demonstration project, but it would be an excellent next step.

Even though I approached it differently than I had anticipated, I believe I was successful in achieving the goal of leadership development through the activities detailed above (*Magnifications* writing opportunities, leadership roles in CWM). Most importantly, I was intentional about incorporating a leadership development piece into

the CWM annual conference. Naomi's preaching workshop was extremely well received and she provided skills that were relevant and needed. I think the precedent was set to include a leadership training block in future conferences. We did not meet the goal of having 80 women attend the conference, but we did come close to meeting the 50% clergy goal.

There are three final ideas I'd like to note with an eye toward future plans. The first idea has to do with M.Div. students who are required to do internships in churches. Unfortunately it is difficult for women to find Churches of Christ that will allow them to preach. One of the projects the CWM could facilitate would be to match up students who are looking for internships with congregations that are happy to have a female intern preach. Perhaps there is funding available so that the congregation could host the intern without incurring any expenses. This is a project that would benefit churches and would benefit female students. I have some leads for funding and I hope to work on this in the near future.

The second idea has to do with the concept of ordination. Since Churches of Christ do not usually think in terms of ordaining their ministers, most Church of Christ women don't consider the need to seek ordination; however, if they are giving their professional time in pastoral service of a church (even if they are serving as a children's minister, youth minister or women's minister), it would be wise for them to seek ordination from the congregation. Since all ordination in the Churches of Christ is done through the local congregation, this is the best opportunity a woman has to receive ordination. While it might not affect her in any way if she continues to work in Churches of Christ, it will be a significant help to her if she chooses to go to a different

denomination or go into chaplaincy or parachurch work. The Community of Women Ministers can play a role in encouraging women to seek ordination and helping the women and their congregations to craft ordination documents.¹²⁴

The final idea has to do with the opportunity to support the marriages and families of women in ministry. When a woman takes on an unconventional role, it inevitably places strain on her marriage. This is well known among women who are leaders in the secular world. Resentment can build up on the part of either spouse. Often expectations, even unspoken or unrecognized expectations, are not met which puts strain on the relationship. While some people enter marriage with excellent relationship skills, others do not. And even good marriages with strong communication and coping skills can suffer due to the stress that comes by being part of a church conflict. The Community of Women Ministers has the opportunity to support marriages by giving women insight into the dynamics present in a non-traditional family structure, equipping them to approach their marriages with more sensitivity and compassion. We also should consider providing marriage enrichment opportunities for women ministers and their husbands. The opportunity to gather with other couples in similar situations can be very supportive and healing. While my focus has been on the loneliness women have felt in answering a call to ministry, we are wise to recognize that their husbands may experiences something quite similar, having no mentors or models of being a pastor's husband.

¹²⁴ These thoughts about ordination came from a series of conversations with Jen Rogers, a friend and colleague who has been a strong advocate for women ministers and a leader in the CWM since the early 2000s.

CHAPTER SIX: MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

The process of creating my demonstration project has had profound effects on my competency as a minister. The simple act of investing myself in the work has given me so many opportunities to grow as a person and as a pastor. There has been a conscious claiming of the gifts that God has given to me for ministry, a recognition of the wealth of experience I have gained over twenty years of pastoral work, as well as a renewed ownership of the work God has placed before me. In addition to increasing my vocational identity and understanding, I have learned so much about the craft of ministry and grown in my understanding of the pastoral needs before me. I am deeply grateful for the gifts that this opportunity has been to me.

In the section below I will discuss each of my three selected competencies. With assistance from my site team, I chose to focus on increasing my competency as a preacher, as a prophetic agent and as a leader. While I have grown in all three of these areas through a wide variety of activities and learning opportunities, I have chosen to focus in this paper on one large educational undertaking in each area. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to intentionally focus on each of these, separately, through three different programs. Each program was extensive in and of itself, addressing the competency in great detail, and significantly increased my knowledge and skills. For this I am most excited and appreciative.

Preaching

The first ministerial competency I chose to focus on is that of preaching. The past few years have been exciting years for me when it comes to preaching. Women preach very rarely in the Churches of Christ. Even in the most progressive churches most Sundays the preacher is male. I have been preaching two or three times a year, for approximately 14 years, as part of my role at the Manhattan Church of Christ. But in 2015 I was invited to be a keynote preacher at Summit, the Abilene Christian University Bible Lectureship. And in 2017 I was invited to be a keynote preacher at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures. I was the first woman from the Churches of Christ to preach in that spot at ACU, and I was the second to preach in that position at Pepperdine. Thus, while I don't have many opportunities to preach in a typical Sunday service, I have found myself preaching on these "big stages," feeling like the eyes of the world are on me. Even though I don't do it often, I feel the pressure to do it well. Additionally, I truly enjoy the craft of preaching. It is one of my favorite parts of ministry. I haven't studied preaching since I was in seminary in the 1990s, so choosing preaching as a competency focus for my doctorate was a wise thing to do.

I addressed this competency by enrolling in a preaching class with Dr. Mark Love at Rochester College. Rochester is a small Church of Christ college located in Rochester, Michigan. The class was online. We read the following books: *Finally Comes the Poet* by Walter Brueggemann, *The Word before the Powers* by Charles L. Campbell, and *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale. All three books were educational and formative. Brueggemann presents the preacher as someone who communicates poetically, and thereby has the opportunity share truth in a way that is

limited by prose.¹²⁵ Campbell presents preaching as a practice that challenges demonic and oppressive forces, the “rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens” (Eph 6:12). He presents a sophisticated theological view of spiritual warfare and the power of the gospel for true redemption.¹²⁶ Tisdale helps preachers to ground their work in the context of the community, approaching the text with “priestly listening” in order to share truth with the community, and “priestly questioning” of the text on behalf of the community.

While the books and class discussions increased my understanding of the internal logic and art of preaching, the class also helped me to improve from a technical perspective. We discussed the importance of reading scripture in different places and in different ways. I realized that I hear a text differently when I read it out loud, standing up, versus silently while seated. We talked using the energy and rhythm of a text as a guide to crafting the energy and rhythm of a sermon. We looked at how writing words to be spoken aloud is different than writing words to be read silently; how short phrases are the most powerful and easily understood; how the preacher can use words to create mental images and playfully use these images to create a more powerful sermon.

While I was taking this class I was also in the process of writing my Esther sermon for the Pepperdine Bible Lectures. Dr. Love was gracious enough to read my sermon and give me his feedback. His comments were enormously helpful. The sermon I had written told a complicated story. It was a good sermon and would work if I could

¹²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), Kindle Location, 56.

¹²⁶ Campbell, 22.

maintain my energy. I would not have realized this on my own and his comments helped me to effectively preach the sermon.

The most important result of taking this class for me is that I not only gained competency at preaching, but I gained confidence as well. This confidence helps me to claim preaching as a strong vocational skill in spite of the fact that I have never preached regularly. This will be the reality for most women who are called to preach and are also called to stay in the Churches of Christ. It is my prayer that this changes, and that it changes sooner rather than later. But in the meantime, it is important that those of us who are called to preach, and are gifted for preaching, know that the vocation is ours to claim, even when we cannot claim a pulpit.

Prophetic Agent

I had the privilege of taking part in the New York Theological Seminary Going Home trip, April 16-24, 2017. The group consisted of 50 people, primarily NYTS faculty and students. We left New York City on a bus at night on Easter Sunday and spent eight full days on the road. The trip included the following locations: Charleston, South Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; Selma, Alabama; Montgomery, Alabama; Vicksburg, Mississippi; Glendora, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; and Washington, D.C.

I decided to do the trip because Dr. Wanda Lundy had strongly encouraged me to participate. Even though I didn't know anyone on the trip except my two professors, Dr. Lundy and Dr. Moody-Shepherd, I was excited about the opportunity. I had never spent any time in the south and did not have much understanding of the history or culture. I knew that this trip would be a good experience. I had a longing to grow in my understanding of how slavery and racism has shaped the country and the church.

However, even though I wanted to go on the trip, and was excited and grateful for the opportunity, I experienced a growing apprehension as the date grew closer. I realized I was nervous—nervous to be traveling on a bus with a bunch of people I didn't know, and nervous about the things I was going to see and hear and learn.

In the months leading up to the trip I was deep in my study of Esther, preparing for my upcoming sermon at the Pepperdine Lectures. As I noticed my fear in approaching the trip, I made a connection to Esther. Esther was safe in the palace, while her people, the Jews, were in great danger. Her cousin Mordecai said to her, “Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?” I realized that my choice was similar to Esther's. I didn't have to go on this trip. It was Easter Sunday. I have five kids. I have a million responsibilities. No one would fault me for canceling my plans to go on the trip. However, for me, staying home would have been akin to Esther staying safely in the palace, ignoring the danger her people were facing.

Our first stop was the historic Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This is the church where nine people were killed by a white supremacist at the conclusion of their Wednesday evening Bible study. I knew this was going to be the first stop on our trip and I felt afraid at the thought of entering this space. I had been sitting near the back of the bus so I was one of the last to get off. As I neared the front of the bus, Dr. Moody-Shepherd was waiting to get off last. As I walked past she grabbed my hand and looked in my eyes. “We've gotta do it, babe.” In this moment, Dr. Moody-

Shepherd became my Mordecai. Just as Mordecai prophetically articulated Esther's vocation, "Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this," Dr. Moody-Shepherd articulated God's call to me—to take courage and leave the safety of my denial, the safety of my privileged status. To courageously go, even though I was afraid.

The trip was unlike anything I have ever experienced. Educationally, it was amazing. I experientially learned about the history of slavery and racial terrorism in our country. Being in the places, hearing the voices, seeing the buildings and the homes and the churches, brought this history alive in a way that was jolting and transformative. For example, I cried when I sat in the church in Montgomery, Alabama where four little girls were killed at church by a bomb. I saw pictures of the girls' faces and imagined them giggling in the bathroom moments before the bomb went off. Images of my own little girls floated through my mind as I wrestled with the harsh realities of racial terrorism. These precious children were targeted because of the color of their skin. I was protected because of mine. I walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, hearing the stories of Bloody Sunday, when people were attacked with dogs, billy clubs and tear gas as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery, demanding voting rights for African Americans in 1965.

I was the only white student in the group. There was also a white professor, but the rest of my new friends on this trip were people of color. When we read the rules that governed the Jim Crow south, I realized that it would have been illegal for me to be on this trip. I would have been prohibited from associating with anyone of African descent. I thought of how impoverished my life would be without my dear friends of African

descent, and could only begin to imagine what it must have been like to live in a society gripped by so much fear and hatred.

When I hear stories of racial terrorism, whether from last week or 200 years ago, my heart becomes heavy and my stomach ties itself in knots, but a part of me—consciously or subconsciously—feels disconnected because the victims don’t look like me or my family. But my friends of color hear these same stories and see themselves. The victims look like the face they see in the mirror, and like their mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. This creates a corporate memory of trauma. In Carolyn Osiek’s words, it’s the “personal and collective memory of accumulated pain.”¹²⁷ Stories of racial oppression and persecution are told and passed down through the generations. The honor of those gone before is preserved and the memory stays alive. I realized that I was on this trip as a humble guest. My new friends graciously invited me into their world of sacred stories and memories. I was honored and grateful.

This experience shaped me as a prophetic agent in ways too numerous and too subtle to articulate. However, there are some ways that are clear and worth mentioning. As I stated in chapter 4, I have a new understanding of how pervasive white supremacy has led to a corrosive racist ideology and theology that continues to be present the country and in the church. I also came to see in a renewed way how our country was built on the blood, sweat and tears of enslaved Africans; how these people were kidnapped and taken away from homes and a land they loved. I saw for the first time how different American mythology is from the true story, and I found myself angry that white American children aren’t being taught the truth. I spent hours talking to new friends, men

¹²⁷ See page 24 for full quote.

and women of color who shared their stories with me. We not only talked and listened and respectfully shared, but we also bonded through the long hard hours of bus travel. We joked and sang and laughed until we cried. I felt blessed and changed, and truly grateful for the gift. I emerged as a better pastor—understanding more about the dynamics of change, the urgency of advocacy, and a theology of a God who hears the cries of the broken hearted and moves with strength deliver the oppressed.

Leader

I had the opportunity to participate in the Auburn Seminary Pastoral Coach Training program. It took place from January 8-12, 2018, in Galveston, Texas. According to the International Coach Federation, coaching is “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” I chose to enroll in the program for a number of reasons. First of all I felt it would give me skills that I could use in congregational ministry or use outside of congregation ministry as needed. Secondly, I am in a position to have a mentoring relationship with women ministers in the Churches of Christ. I have already done some mentoring for seminary students, both in person and over the phone, and I truly enjoy it. But I don’t like an approach to mentoring that focuses on my own life story and choices. My mentoring style is much more about helping others to listen to their own call, their own wisdom, and their own life experiences to help them with future plans and decisions. I felt that the coaching model would give me tools to mentor more effectively.

It is helpful to think in terms of coaching skills, a coaching orientation, and the coaching profession. While the program prepared me for all three of these, the first two are relevant to a pastoral leadership competency since coaching skills and a coaching orientation can be incorporated into my current pastoral role. The term “coach”

originated when stagecoaches helped people to travel from one place to another. This is the fundamental essence of coaching. Coaching is a process in which one person helps another travel to new places—spiritually, emotionally, vocationally, relationally. The principle that underlies coaching is that people are creative, resourceful and whole. A coach holds a profound belief in the agency of the other person, approaching her or him with unconditional positive regard.

Theologically, I see coaching as a practice of holding a person's blessedness before them and encouraging them to act as a beloved child of God. Henri Nouwen's words are insightful on this point.

Many people... feel like victims of a world they cannot change, and the daily newspapers certainly don't help much in coping with that feeling. The sense of being cursed often comes more easily than the sense of being blessed, and we can find enough arguments to feed it. We can say: "Look at what is happening in the world: Look at the starving people, the refugees, the prisoners, the sick and the dying... Look at all the poverty, injustice and war... Look at our daily struggle with our relationships, with our work, with our health..." Where is the blessing? The feeling of being cursed comes easily. We easily hear an inner voice calling us evil, bad, rotten, worthless, useless, doomed to sickness and death. Isn't it easier for us to believe that we are cursed than that we are blessed? Still, I say to you, as the Beloved Child of God, you are blessed. Good words are being spoken to you and about you – words that tell the truth. The curses – noisy and boisterous, loud-mouthed as they may be – do not tell the truth. They are lies.¹²⁸

While all pastoral care involves affirming the blessedness of another, coaching takes this a step further. The practice of coaching empowers the other person to take powerful actions and make significant life changes out of the place of blessedness. While pastoral care is the action of empathetically sitting with someone, recognizing the

¹²⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: And, Our Greatest Gift* (New York: Crossroads, 2002), 61.

presence of God in their life, pastoral coaching is the action of harnessing the energy that is intrinsic to this place of blessing and empowering the person for positive action.

This is a powerful tool for leaders in faith communities that are in the midst of transition. The process of change is difficult. Real change takes courage and conviction. Women ministers in the Churches of Christ are doing things they have never seen women do in the past. They must harness their blessedness—believing again every day that they are doing the work God is calling them to do—in order to continue and thrive in these new roles.

Coaching is a verbal practice. The work of coaching happens in conversations between the person who is coaching and the person who is being coached. The fundamental coaching skills include active listening, powerful questioning and direct communication. The result is that the person being coached is able to articulate important truths. As my speech pathologist friend, Julie Short, explained in chapter three, language helps us to organize our inner worlds. Through language we organize our thoughts and come to understand ourselves. If we remember the words of Charles Taylor, that “inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality,” then we can understand the potential power inherent in putting out thoughts, feelings, beliefs, assumptions, hopes, dreams and plans into words. The process of articulation actually shapes reality.

Thus, coaching is an important practice to incorporate into a theological world that has silenced women. Women need to be lovingly encouraged to speak—to have the courage to put their thoughts into words. Powerful, courageous, world-changing action will not come until these thoughts are given the space to be articulated. I look forward to incorporating coaching skills into my work as minister and as a leader in the Community

of Women Ministers. It has given me a skill set that is new to me and incredibly needed for the work that God has called me to do.

CHAPTER SEVEN: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

As I near the end of this project I ponder the future. We have examined the process for women of coming to feminist awareness. There are so many women in the Churches of Christ right now who are on this journey toward awareness. The process of awareness is ultimately about finding one's own voice, and the courage to speak. We have seen how the spoken word is fundamental to the Christian faith and recognized that God is indeed calling all of us to speak. We have heard from women of color and learned how they are finding their voices while also navigating multiple interlocking systems of oppression. And we have talked about the importance of humbly listening to each other, of boldly telling our stories, and of standing supportively together as friends. From this place we wonder together what the future holds.

In *Beyond Anger*, Carolyn Osiek outlines a number of ways that women have found to cope with feminist awareness in a patriarchal context.¹²⁹ Her two strategies that are most relevant to women in the ecumenical Churches of Christ are the revisionist and the liberationist strategies. The revisionist strategy is the one that we see most often in the Churches of Christ today. Revisionists take on the task of reinterpreting the tradition to free it from the cultural baggage that distorts its true meaning. They believe that patriarchy and androcentrism in the church are the result of sinful cultural influences that

¹²⁹ Osiek, 25-43. Osiek outlines five different ways of coping for women with feminist consciousness that choose to remain within the traditional faith community and structures of belief: marginalist, loyalist, symbolist, revisionist, and liberationist. While her entire discussion is enlightening, the last two, the revisionist and the liberationist, are most relevant to my research.

have made their way into the interpretation of scripture and the whole of Christian theological tradition. Their task is to peel away the misinformation, biases and assumptions in order to accurately interpret scripture and come to a correct theological understanding.

In the Churches of Christ this process consists almost exclusively of exegetical analysis of scripture. Thus, we hear Paul's command for women to be silent in 1 Timothy 2, and we ask who was he talking to, and what else was going on, and what exact words does he use in his original language, and how would the original audience have received these words? We attempt to set aside our preconceptions and hear the text with new ears. We hold Paul's prohibitive remarks against his repeated comments regarding the partnership he enjoys with women in the work of the gospel and ask ourselves if perhaps we are misunderstanding him when he commands women to be silent. This is important work, especially for a tradition that is wired the way we are. We will never make lasting changes if we can't firmly believe that they are rooted in a responsible reading of scripture.

However, as Osiek points out, there are limitations to the revisionist mindset. This approach relies on a belief that when scripture is read accurately it will, at a minimum, set the stage for change. Most of the time we are hoping that change will simply happen as a result of the new understanding. This is where so many churches get stuck. They have studied and re-studied the passages about women and have come to the conclusion that it's totally fine for women to do absolutely anything God calls them to do in or out of the church. This truth is powerful and transformative; however, they are quickly disappointed to find that nothing changes. Even if the leaders and the members of a church are

convinced, changes don't naturally follow. As strong as our commitments are to restoring the church we see in the New Testament, change is still difficult. In some ways we certainly want to look like the New Testament church, but in other strong ways we just want to continue to look like ourselves—the way we look today and have always looked. As Osiek explains, “Even if a retelling of history can show us that we are free to change, and even if a careful interpretation of that data from the standpoint of the theology of revelation shows us that patriarchy is neither God-given nor willed by Jesus, all of this is only clearing the way. It still does not provide sufficient motivation for change now. If Jesus did not want patriarchy and the submission of women, what did he want and how does that impel us to want the same?”¹³⁰

This is the element that has been lacking from our discussions. Removing the prohibitions without replacing them with an imperative will never result in true and lasting change. We need to understand not only what God is not against, but we need to understand what God is actually for. This is the value inherent in the liberationist strategy. Grounded in the broader conversation of liberation theology, liberationists believe that

The reign of God proclaimed in the Gospels has a concrete historical dimension as well as a transcendent heavenly one. That historical dimension can be brought about only by the establishment of a just society which includes, besides the abolition of racism and classism, the end of sexism as well. Only when all persons accept the full equality and dignity of one another can the reign of God promised by Jesus arrive. Laboring to bring it about is the task and mission of all believers who are called to be complementary partners in the service of the Gospel.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Osiek, 39.

¹³¹ Ibid., 40-41.

Thus liberationists feel that they are to show preference for the marginalized, the disenfranchised and the oppressed, since this is God's preference as well. The decision to act, to make changes that lean toward justice, is no longer seen as optional. These changes are imperative and fundamental to living out the gospel in a faithful and responsible way.

One of the ways the liberationist model might be helpful in the Churches of Christ would be for us to rethink our understanding of restoration. While we tend to think of restoring the church of the New Testament, we might do well to consider restoring the Garden of Eden. The garden was a place of complete well-being, wholeness, perfection, abundance and peace. The biblical word for this is *shalom*. The concept of *shalom* communicates God's desire for the people and the world God created. Lisa Sharon Harper explores creational *shalom* in the following way,

While the word Shalom is not used in Genesis 1 or 2, these chapters give us two of the most vivid pictures of shalom in Scripture. In these texts we see one of the central concepts of shalom—we are all connected—lived out. The peace of self is dependent upon the peace of the other. God created the world in a web of relationships that overflowed with forceful goodness. These relationships are far-reaching: between humanity and God, between humanity and self, between genders, between humanity and the rest of creation, within families, between ethnic groups or races, and between nations. These relationships were “very good” in the beginning. One word characterized them all: shalom. Then the story of the Fall (Genesis 3) explains how the relationships were broken. The rest of Scripture takes us on a journey toward redemption and restoration.¹³²

If we can see, in the mission of Jesus, God's action to restore humanity to the beauty and unity present at creation, then we could understand how we as Christians are

¹³² Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2016), 13.

called to work toward the restoration of creational *shalom*.¹³³ In this way our restorationist heritage lends itself to the liberationist model.

The truth is that change happens as a result of many different forces working together. While Osiek has outlined multiple alternatives from her own experience and context, the challenge for us is to look at our own context and garner the resources that are uniquely ours. I do believe our tradition has great strengths and the potential for true change. One very tangible opportunity lies in our theological commitment to the priesthood of all believers and our practice of open leadership. This opportunity is significant and worthy of some investigation.

In most Churches of Christ there is one minister who is responsible for preaching every Sunday. In more and more churches there is also a worship minister who designs the service and leads the music.¹³⁴ Other than these two roles, every word in the service is spoken by a lay member of the congregation. Prayers, scripture readings, announcements, and the words spoken over communion are all shared among the members of the congregation.

This is an unusual and beautiful tradition. The belief that a person does not need to have special training or a high degree of education to lead God's people in worship is beautifully reflective of the kingdom Jesus desires. Our practice stands in contrast to many Christian traditions who allow only ordained clergy to preside over the Eucharist or perform baptisms. In the Churches of Christ there is no belief that a person needs ordination or education to lead these sacred rituals. All that is required for leadership is

¹³³ See Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*.

¹³⁴ This is a role that, until recently and still in many places, was filled by a volunteer "song leader."

faith in Jesus and a desire to live out our baptismal covenant in Christian discipleship. The problem, of course, is that this beautiful tradition of open leadership in our worship services is tainted because it is actually quite closed. We have succeeded in blurring the clergy-laity distinction; however, we have enforced other requirements. Our requirements do not have to do with religious status, but rather with body parts.

When the apostle Paul describes the worship of the early church in 1 Corinthians he describes an open style of leadership. “When you meet together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these things must be done to build up the church” (1 Cor 14:26b). The picture is of all the believers sharing as they are led by God to do so. But, unlike us, Paul excludes no one on the basis of gender. It is clear that women were an important part of the church, yet Paul never mentions any limitations placed on women when he discusses spiritual gifts and roles in corporate worship.

Churches of Christ have the opportunity to follow the model of the early church, opening leadership to all members. We have the right instinct in this area and if only churches could truly practice their priesthood of all believers convictions they would experience an unleashing of God’s spirit in worship in ways they never have before. There is so much potential beauty, joy and encouragement in a worship time that is not tightly controlled by religious professionals but is truly led by a cross section of the community of believers.

The words that are spoken in a worship service are not simply content, but they are embodied content. One of the mysteries of corporate worship comes from flesh and blood human beings sitting together and hearing the words of God read, spoken, by other

flesh and blood human beings. This is vastly different than sitting at home and reading silently to ourselves. Homiletician Karoline Lewis puts it this way, “The Word becomes flesh again in proclamation, incarnated anew in the body of the preacher and in the body of the congregation.”¹³⁵ In the Churches of Christ the word is incarnated not only during the sermon, but also during the prayers, scripture readings and communion meditations. When all different people are invited to speak in worship, their testimonies bring transformation. The speaker is changed, the hearers are changed, and the world is changed.

Living in Liminal Space

As Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson explain, “in each generation feminist work is received as if it had no historical past.”¹³⁶ The truth is women in the Churches of Christ stand on the shoulders of generations of women who have gone before us, paving the way. Meet four Marys—Mary T. Graft, Mary Morrison, Mary Ogle, and Mary Stogdill. These women were preaching, baptizing and planting churches at the very beginning of our movement, the early 1800s. Barbara Kellison and Marinda Lemert wrote in favor of women in ministry in the mid-1800s. Clara Hale Babcock, Jessie Coleman Monser, Sadie McCoy Crank, Bertha Mason Fuller, Sarah Lue Bostick, and Clara Espy Hazelrigg were all preaching in the late 1800s. Selina Moore Holman advocated for an expansion of women’s roles in the early 1900s, right after the Churches of Christ separated from the Disciples.¹³⁷ We can gain power and confidence from

¹³⁵ Karoline Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 59.

¹³⁶ Turner and Hudson, 89.

¹³⁷ Douglas A. Foster, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 777.

knowing these names and realizing that we are part of a bigger story than the one we see right before us.

At the same time, we must look at the story that is before us. We are at a critical time in history. In the months I have spent writing this paper the news has been filled with story after story of women finding the courage to admit that they have been abused or assaulted by men with physical, professional, religious or financial power over them. The domination system is hard at work in our world, seeking to steal, kill and destroy. But the redemptive power of God is at work even in these places of heinous destruction. Women are coming to awareness of the ways they have been discounted, the ways they have been silenced and the ways they have been abused. They are finding their voices and the courage to tell their stories. We are witnessing a sacred process. Women are laying down the sinful tendency to be silent in the face of injustice. Women are realizing that they can never love their neighbors if they don't wholeheartedly love themselves. The conversations that are happening are raw, painful and absolutely necessary if we are to ever find healing.

Carolyn Osiek painted the picture of a woman standing with her arms outstretched “suspended in the present painful reality” between “the familiar past that has to be given up” and “the desired future that is not yet to be attained.”¹³⁸ This is where we stand. Like Jesus on the cross, our arms are stretched out between the painful acknowledgement of the past and the hope we hold for healing in the future. In this way we are living cruciformed lives, or perhaps the image is that of arms outstretched to carry our own crosses as we have been commanded to do by our savior (Matthew 16:24).

¹³⁸ Osiek, 64.

As we ponder this image, a concept that is helpful is that of liminal space. If one hand is holding the past and the other is reaching into the future, we are living in between the now and the not yet. Liminality is a term borrowed from the field of anthropology. It is used to refer to “an ambiguous phase between two situations or statuses.”¹³⁹ We are in liminal space when we have left one place but have not yet arrived at the next. We are en route, in limbo, finding our existence not in one place or another but in the in between space of transition. Theologians Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers explore the theological potential in the concept of liminality. The metaphor they choose is that of a trapeze artist who is “swirling through space, *in transit* through midair, having been released from the arms of the fellow trapeze artists and expecting to be caught in the firm and faithful grip of those waiting.”¹⁴⁰ They explain that liminal space is filled with possibility as well as danger. “The liminal state of displacement breathes a sense of dislocation and disorientation; it exudes a sense of being in no one’s land, where the landscape appears completely different from that to which one is accustomed, where there is no discernible road map, and the journeyer is jolted out of normalcy.”¹⁴¹

This is an accurate description of our journey as women who have left the patriarchal faith that was given to us and journey forward toward a promised inclusive gospel reality. It is not our imagination when we feel like everything has changed. It has. We are in liminal space—somewhere between the past and the future. A new normal has not been established and there is no road map. But in this space true newness is possible.

¹³⁹ Charles L. Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 41.

¹⁴⁰ Campbell and Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*, 41.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Liminal space is a space of high creativity, where the experiences of the past and the promises of the future inform the present reality. “In liminal space, one thus experiences both the fullness and emptiness of presence and absence. Borders remain porous, open to all sides. In this space, fear, seriousness, and closure compete with openness, freedom and creativity. There is the possibility of new revelation and transformation, of dying and living, of hope and resurrection.”

As Christians we can understand the cross of Jesus as liminal space. The arms of Jesus were physically stretched out to interrupt the old and inaugurate the new. Campbell and Cilliers explain that “liminality, for Christians, is *theological*; it lies at the heart of the gospel, the heart of theology. Christians are a liminal people who live, not fearfully, but faithfully ‘on the Way’ at the juncture of the ages.”¹⁴² Thus, our experience as women who have come to a feminist awareness within a patriarchal church structure is an experience of authentic Christianity. We may be weary of the struggle and wish for the transition to end, but an essential component of being a Christian exists in this space of transition. Our exploration of the liminal space between patriarchal domination and expansive inclusivity has focused on gender. But we could spend volumes uncovering the ways that patriarchal domination manifests itself, and even more space exploring the possibilities that are promised in the expansive inclusivity of the Kingdom of God. Our journey as feminist Christians has truly taken us along the Via Dolorosa—Christ’s way of suffering. But the God who brought life to that place of death indeed dwells in us and will certainly give life to our mortal bodies as well (Romans 8:11 NRSV).

¹⁴² Ibid., 43.

One of the most tangible human examples of liminal space is pregnancy. Women who are pregnant are in fact living in a threshold space where two ages overlap. The old is in fact gone but the new has not yet come. A pregnant woman knows, in her body and in her soul, that her position is unstable. And as much as she may be nervous about the birth process, or perhaps reluctant to part with the kicking baby who has become so familiar inside her body, she knows that things cannot stay as they are. This baby who was once very much a part of her, whose body was once indistinguishable from her own, has grown to a point and is moving in a way that communicates to her the undeniable truth that this child is an independent being, still housed in her body, but clearly not intended to stay there. The pregnant woman is on the threshold of a new age—soon, very soon, the old will pass away and the new will come.

My mind travels back to Mary and Elizabeth in the first chapter of Luke. As these women stood together they held the fulfillment of God's promises in their very bodies. They knew in their physical, biological beings, even more than in their hearts, beyond anything they could grasp with their minds, they knew in their bodies the reality of God's promises being fulfilled. They stood together in the doorway of Elizabeth's home on the threshold of a new age, together pregnant with the promises of God, together carrying the very people who would in fact usher God's kingdom into the world, together waiting in faith for God's promises to be fulfilled. Then Mary, after being blessed by Elizabeth, her sister in pregnancy and in faith, sings those prophetic words. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." Her words describe her present reality embraced through faith in God, but they also prophetically claim her hope and confidence

in the age to come. They describe the new creation coming to fruition in the kingdom of God.

This is my message to my sisters in the Churches of Christ: we stand in the exact same place as Mary and Elizabeth. Our potential for new birth is just as great as it was for them, and just as Elizabeth blessed Mary for holy and prophetic speech, we do as well—standing together, blessing each other and boldly proclaiming a vision of the new world that God is bringing about through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us, with them, courageously preach the gospel.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Demonstration Project Proposal

LEST THE ROCKS CRY OUT:
EQUIPPING WOMEN TO MOVE FROM SILENCE TO
AUTHORITATIVE SPEECH

By

Amy Elizabeth Bost Henegar

A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

New York Theological Seminary

December 8, 2016

CHALLENGE STATEMENT

I am a pastor for the Manhattan Church of Christ in New York City and the leader of the Women in Ministry Network, a support network for female clergy in the Churches of Christ. Traditionally women have been excluded from leadership roles in corporate worship based on a patriarchal interpretation of scripture. Many churches are opening the way for female leadership, but it is still difficult for women to step into leadership roles, even when they are invited. If women are not better equipped and supported for leadership, the change efforts will fail. This project will develop a comprehensive strategy for the Women in Ministry Network to support and equip women in ecumenical Churches of Christ.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE SETTING

My ministry setting has a congregational level as well as a denominational level. At the congregational level, I have been an associate minister for the Manhattan Church of Christ since 2001. We are a nearly 100-year-old congregation located on the Upper Eastside of Manhattan.¹ Our theology and practices are rooted in the Churches of Christ which come out of the American Restoration Movement along with the Independent Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ.² Of the three, the Churches of Christ are the most conservative with a history of legalism and sectarianism. Our congregation, however, has attempted to hold on to the blessings of the tradition while abandoning oppressive beliefs and practices.

We are a diverse group of people, with many races and cultures represented in the congregation. We are socio-economically diverse as well. Our members tend to be educated, with many who hold college degrees. Our senior minister was a New Testament professor before he took on his pastoral role. His sermons and classes are reminiscent of a seminary classroom and are attractive to people who are looking for an intellectually rigorous faith. We have many families with children in the congregation. Many of those are two parent families

¹ For a detailed history of the Manhattan Church of Christ, see "History." Manhattan Church of Christ. Accessed November 10, 2016. <http://www.manhattanchurch.org/mcoc-history/>.

² For a detailed history of the American Restoration Movement and the Churches of Christ see Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* and C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ*, (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988).

and, since New York City is an expensive place to live, most families rely on the income of both parents.

In 2000 the elders of the congregation made a significant change regarding gender roles in the church.³ Up until that point all positions of leadership in congregation and the worship services had been limited to men. In that year the decision was made to open all of these roles equally to women. To this day the congregation continues to distinguish itself from the majority of the denomination⁴ in this way. While most congregations are patriarchal in doctrine and complementarian in practice, the Manhattan Church of Christ strives to be fully egalitarian.⁵

The Churches of Christ are in the midst of great change across the denomination. Richard Beck, a professor at Abilene Christian University, has described these changes well.⁶ He maintains that congregations in the Churches of Christ are moving in one of two directions: in an ecumenical direction or in a

³ This story is told in detail in a journal article by Thomas L. Robinson and Amy Bost Henegar. "Women Fully Using Their Gifts: The Journey of the Manhattan Church of Christ." *Leaven* 20/2 (2012) 78-84.

⁴ I repeatedly use the term *denomination* even though, since their inception, the Churches of Christ have resisted this label. The movement began as a conscious effort to bring unity among denominations, and not to start a new denomination. Many today still resist the term and prefer to use the terms *brotherhood* or *fellowship*. Personally I think the term is appropriate and I prefer it to the alternatives.

⁵ The terms *patriarchal*, *complementarian* and *egalitarian* are defined and discussed in the following two books which I highly recommend: Bonnidell Clouse, Robert G. Clouse, and Robert Duncan. Culver. *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, and James R. Beck, Craig L. Blomberg, and Craig S. Keener. *Two Views on Women in Ministry*.

⁶ Beck, Richard. "Four Reasons Why I'm Church of Christ." *Experimental Theology*:. October 11, 2011. Accessed November 10, 2016. <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2011/10/four-reasons-why-im-church-of-christ.html>.

sectarian direction. His analysis is consistent with my experience.⁷ The role of women in the church is certainly one of the issues that is dividing the denomination. Congregations that are moving in the direction of ecumenism are invariably wrestling with questions of changing gender roles, while sectarian congregations are firmly rooted in traditional gender roles.

Because of my education and ministry experience, I am often invited to preach, speak and teach at denominational events. Through this work I have met many people who seem hungry for change. People often approach me and thank me for the work I am doing. Men talk to me about their wives and daughters and tell me how their church is trying to make changes. Women tell me heart-wrenching stories about churches who have either excluded them or welcomed them.⁸ We are in a time of transition and many are hoping that churches will open up opportunities for women to become leaders.

In 2001 I began the Women in Ministry Network.⁹ The group started as an email list with fewer than ten members, and has grown into a thriving group of over 175 members who communicate regularly through social media and annual conferences.¹⁰ The stated mission of the group is *to provide support,*

⁷ It is important to note that my ministry setting is strictly within the ecumenical side of the denomination. While I have friends and family members on the sectarian side, they do not accept my role as a leader or within the church or denomination.

⁸ Billie Silvey, *Trusting Women: The Way of Women in Churches of Christ* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002).

⁹ While I began the online part of the group which began with an email list and grew into a thriving Facebook community, the group began with D'Esta Love, Jeanene Reese, my mother Sheila Bost and I dreaming about the potential for bringing together women in ministry from Churches of Christ.

¹⁰ New members are added to our group every week.

encouragement and blessing to women called to vocational ministry within the Churches of Christ. The women in this group are united by the following commonalities: 1) we are connected in some significant way to the Churches of Christ, 2) we have engaged in some level of theological education, and 3) we are working in some type of vocational ministry, or are in the process of seeking/preparing for vocational ministry.¹¹ Most of our women are spread across the United States, but we do have a few who live in other parts of the world. The majority of our members live in Texas and Tennessee, but we cover every region of the country.

Through the years we have attempted to meet together as a group for an annual conference, but it has proven to be difficult. The barriers of travel, time and funds continue to keep our numbers low.¹² While we have had some successful conferences, the online community continues to be more accessible to the majority of our members. We have also formed a tradition of gathering as a group for a meal at the large-scale denominational events. Through all of these avenues the members of the group have found friendships as well as professional and personal support.

I see myself as a pastor of this group. Even though the group exists primarily in “cyber-space,” the concerns that are shared are important and the

¹¹ The nature of our changing theological landscape necessitates that the group be open to women in a wide variety of circumstances. Many women who would love to be employed as ministers do not have such opportunities available to them. As such, the invitation is extended to any woman who self-identifies as someone who is called to ministry. Most are seeking ministry in Churches of Christ, but some of the women have roots in the Churches of Christ but are pursuing ministry in a different denomination.

¹² Sheryl Sandberg and Nell Scovell, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 106-107.

support received is often vital to a woman minister's spiritual and emotional well-being. I care deeply about these women and have a strong desire to protect the space we share so that they can continue to find the support the need.

CHAPTER 2

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE

CHALLENGE STATEMENT

I am a pastor for the Manhattan Church of Christ in New York City and the leader of the Women in Ministry Network, a support network for female clergy in the Churches of Christ. Traditionally women have been excluded from leadership roles in corporate worship based on a patriarchal interpretation of scripture. Many churches are opening the way for female leadership, but it is still difficult for women to step into leadership roles, even when they are invited. If women are not better equipped and supported for leadership, the change efforts will fail. This project will develop a comprehensive strategy for the Women in Ministry Network to support and equip women in ecumenical Churches of Christ.

Introduction

Progressive Churches of Christ are struggling to make significant changes regarding how they treat and involve women in their faith communities. More and more churches are discussing “the women’s issue” and more and more women are wondering if they should step out of traditional women’s roles into roles that have always been reserved for men. The process of change in a religious community is difficult and exhausting, and it is worse when one is the subject of the very change she is seeking. Women need support through these changes. They need help with the new roles they are playing. They need to be reminded of the theological justification for female Christian leadership. They need emotional support in the face of many, including family and close friends, who are unsupportive of the changes and the women who are willing to step into leadership.

My demonstration project is located in that exact place. My demonstration project is about women listening to God, others and self in a way that compels them to lead. I believe that their voices are vital for the health of the church and it's mission to the world. Ultimately, as Christians we believe that spiritual authority comes from the Holy Spirit. As scholars Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson explain,

“The prophetic authority of Jesus’s voice was transferred to the voices of all who sought the realm of God. Communities of people, not just lone prophets, were empowered by the Spirit to listen to God, others and self in a way that compelled them to speak. The community sought to live out of a dynamic relationship that sustained the mutual conversation among human beings and God. The voices of the community of faith became embodied in individual voices addressing particular situations and contexts. The life-giving creativity of the community’s voice met resistance as it challenged the established order. The voice could not be silenced, however, because it derived its authority from the ongoing divine conversation.”¹³

Analysis

Since 2001 the Women in Ministry Network has functioned as a support group that communicates primarily through over the internet (through email and now on Facebook). We have repeatedly tried to physically gather through an annual conference, but often our gatherings drawn no more than 25 of the 175 members of our group. The challenges for a female minister to travel away from home to attend a Women in Ministry conference are multiple: 1) the travel expenses: since we are spread all over the country, air travel is usually necessary; 2) childcare: many of the women have young children and

¹³ Mary Lin Hudson and Mary Donovan Turner, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 51-52.

being away from home is complicated by that factor; 3) competing obligations: many of the women are being asked to preach, teach and present at various events and the speaking opportunities will always take precedent over an opportunity for fellowship and support.¹⁴

Additionally, the gatherings have suffered from ambiguity regarding the intended audience.¹⁵ There are primarily two groups of women who are find their way to our Women in Ministry Network conferences. The first I will call the *clergy*.¹⁶ These are women who are attempting to find their professional callings in ministry within a Church of Christ context. This group is united by common professional interests and issues. The value of their fellowship is similar to that of any other professional group – sharing resources, ideas, tips about ministry and the life of a female minister.¹⁷ This is the intended audience of the Women in Ministry Network. We began as a group uniting women who were attempting to find a professional ministry role in a Church of Christ context.¹⁸ Our conferences began in an attempt to bring these women together physically. As explained

¹⁵ Hallee Gray Scott, *Dare Mighty Things: Mapping the Challenges of Leadership for Christian Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

¹⁶ The term itself is a bit misleading because the Churches of Christ adamantly hold to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, thus it is counter to the denomination's culture to use the term *clergy*.

¹⁷ Interestingly, many of the women in this group feel a strong internal fire to push for gender changes in their churches, but others do not. While some experience the lack of equality as deeply hurtful and troubling, and struggle with the decisions to stay in their ministry positions, others feel fairly comfortable with the current church structure. These women are sympathetic to a complementation reading of the scripture and have always seen their ministry as taking place in that context. While these women need professional support, especially since they are often the lone woman on an all male staff, they are not looking for an activist group that is working for change.

¹⁸ D'Esta Love, *Finding Their Voices: Sermons by Women in the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2015).

above, it has proven to be hard to physically bring together a critical mass of these women.

The other group that finds their way to our gatherings is made of women that I will refer to as *church leaders*.¹⁹ These are women who are in roles of lay leadership in their churches. While some have titles and others don't, they are women who are actively hoping for and working for changes in church structure and practice regarding women in leadership. Many of them are taking on positions they have never seen a woman occupy. Whether they are leading in a worship service or serving as a deacon or elder or adult Bible class teacher, they likely grew up in a church that prohibited such participation.²⁰

While the stated intention of the Women in Ministry Network is indeed to bring together professional clergy and seminary students, our conference numbers are continually so low that we end up reaching out to local women in church leadership. The result is that the conferences are a mix of both groups. And while we enjoy each other's company and form some enjoyable friendships, in the end neither group is well served. The women in church leadership feel out of place since the focus of the conference is on women in professional ministry. And the professionals feel frustrated because they have invested time and money to spend time with other women who are ministers, but in actuality they have mostly met kind, supportive laywomen.²¹

¹⁹ Halce Gray Scott, *Dare Mighty Things: Mapping the Challenges of Leadership for Christian Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

²⁰ Jackie Roese, *She Can Teach: Empowering Women to Teach the Scriptures Effectively* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

²¹ It may be a stretch to make this claim, but I believe that the nature of the current gatherings could actually have a negative effect on those attending. The professional ministers leave feeling less sure

The truth is that both of these groups of women, the clergy and the laity, desperately need pastoral care and support.²² They feel isolated and frustrated, asking themselves over and over again if they should simply leave the denomination and wash their hands of the entire messy process. They are literally on the verge of filing for divorce from the faith community they have loved for many years, but they feel committed to the denomination and emotionally tied because of family, friends and their shared history. If they don't find the support they need, they will have to leave in order to survive.

I believe the mission of the Women in Ministry Network needs to be expanded to intentionally include both groups of women. We need to think about how to support all of these women in a way that respects each group's distinct needs, encouraging both groups to support each other and not feel threatened by each other. There are multiple areas that must be addressed in order to give these two groups of women the support they need.

Since we are a tradition that attempts to be guided entirely by the Bible, our efforts for change have focused on exegetical and hermeneutical concerns, especially looking at the passages that appear to universally restrict a woman's role in the church. While these passages are extremely important, I believe that there are other critical theological issues to address. *Explaining away the prohibitions only removes the restrictions, but does nothing to compel women to take on new roles.* In other words, just

about their call to vocational ministry, wondering if they should be content to get a "day job" and volunteer in church work like so many other women do. And the laywomen leave questioning the importance their roles as volunteers in comparison to those who are trying to find a vocation in professional ministry, also feeling insecure because of their lack of theological education compared with the professional ministers. The presence of each group elicits the other group's latent feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence.

²² Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 140.

because women are *allowed* to take on leadership roles doesn't mean that they *should*.

For many women, doubts remain in the back of their minds, and they continue to question their own theological legitimacy, even as they are invited to step forward into new roles.²³

Being an agent of change is exhausting and difficult. If the women in our churches are going to be able to sustain their innovative roles, they need support. The struggle itself is isolating and it often feels like there is no one who understands. The truth is that there are many people who understand and by using technology, friendships can be made despite the barriers of time and space. I believe that with the right support, many women who feel they may have to leave might be able to stay. The knowledge that they are not alone, that there are others who feel the way they feel, believe what they believe, and are working toward the same goals, could be just enough to make the difference.²⁴

In addition to emotional support, women also need to be trained and equipped to take on new roles. Women have spent years learning *followership*²⁵ in the church, but they were never trained for leadership. Even women who are pushing for changes in their churches lack of confidence when it comes to stepping into leadership positions. It is one thing to believe fully that women

²³ Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 26.

²⁴ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Can a Sistah Get a Little Help?: Encouragement for Black Women in Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

²⁵ Dr. Eleanor Moody-Shepherd of New York Theological Seminary introduced me to the term *followership*. She explains that women have been socialized in the church to be followers, while men are trained, from a very young age, to be leaders.

should to take on new and non-traditional roles. It is another thing altogether to be the person who is willing to step into a new role when it becomes available.

If our denomination is going to survive, our women must stay. If women continue to feel isolated and frustrated they will leave and many of them will take their families with them. But if they receive the support they need, they will stay, continue to grow, and the effort for change will continue.

CHAPTER 3

PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION

Research

Before I begin with the active phase of my demonstration project, I will need to research my audience as well my content. I have a sense of whom I will be seeking to serve with this demonstration project, but I need to ask more questions so that I can be more accurate and intentional as I develop my plans. I will begin by sending out initial questionnaires. The first will specifically target women in churches that are trying to make significant changes regarding the inclusion of women. I hope that the questionnaires will help me to understand better what these women are experiencing. I would like to find out what gives them hope, what frustrates them, what resources they are drawing from, and what types of support they are lacking. I also need to simply understand what they are being invited to do in their churches, and what is still off limits for them.

The second questionnaire will be directed at women who have identified themselves with the Women in Ministry Network. These are the women who are already in the process of forging new territory in the Churches of Christ and they have already sought out support by joining the Women in Ministry Network. A percentage of these are seminary students who will soon be making important career decisions, including whether to stay in the denomination or to seek ordination elsewhere. I need to ask all of these women some important questions about their needs. Do they feel supported? Where do they receive support for the roles they are playing as pioneers in changing churches? What sort of support are they lacking?

As I engage in the human research dimension of the project, I will simultaneously engage the research questions outlined later in this proposal. The material I develop from the research questions will be the material I use to shape the active phase of the project, which is outlined below.

Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: To educate members and leaders of the Churches of Christ as to a theological and scriptural basis for women's full participation, and to increase the awareness among leaders of the Churches of Christ as to the urgent need to support women leaders in the denomination. I will set out to achieve this goal using the following strategies:

Strategy 1: In May of 2017 I will be a keynote preacher at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures, assigned to preach on the story of Esther. I will use this opportunity to teach a large group about God's call to women to engage in authoritative speech. My sermon will be about Esther but ultimately the message will be about all women and the challenge to find one's voice and to authoritatively speak words of God.

Strategy 2: In June of 2017 I will be present an essay at the Christian Scholars Conference at Lipscomb University. The topic of the session is the intersection of academia and ministry. I will explain that changes in gender roles can only happen when egalitarian ideas are embraced by the church and incorporated into the lives of real people. Since people are shaped by their experiences more than they are by academic knowledge,²⁶ they need models, tools and motivation to do things that are different than

²⁶ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

what they have always known. Academic institutions can play a role in training leaders to cultivate these things, but the real work happens in the local church.

Strategy 3: I plan to contact some key denominational leaders to make a case for investing resources in the Women in Ministry Network. I will outline how important our efforts are to the future of the church, and ask them to seriously consider financially supporting us. This funding is necessary for women, especially those who are seminary students or professional ministers (paid or unpaid), to have the opportunity to attend our retreats and conferences. Securing a commitment to long-term financial support could be the most important determining factor in the success of my project.

Evaluation of Goal 1: The success of this goal will be measured by the response I receive, specifically in willingness to support the goals of the Women in Ministry Network. I will have been successful if we have been able to secure sufficient finances to fund our annual conference for the next five years.

Goal 2: To increase the strength of community among women who are leaders and clergy in the Church of Christ through a re-envisioning the Women in Ministry Network. I will set out to achieve this goal using the following strategies:

Strategy 1: Develop a new website offering a variety of entry points for women to find emotional and spiritual support, theological education, leadership training and other important resources.

Strategy 2: Use technology to bring women together in innovative ways. Whether it's bringing mentoring partners together through regular phone calls or seminary students together through "Google Hangout" (or whatever the current facetime

technology is), I will find ways for women to make supportive connections with each other in spite of the barriers of time and space.

Strategy 3: I will ask current members of the network to take on leadership roles so that our influence can extend farther than it has in the past. Whenever there is a denominational gathering the Women in Ministry Network needs to have a time and space designated to meet. Since our denomination meets primarily on college campuses, I will ask one or two members of the network who are at each college to take the responsibility for organizing a gathering.

Evaluation of Goal 2: The success of this goal will be measured by the number of women who are taking advantage of the various opportunities, having meaningful conversations with other women from the Church of Christ, and finding support for their journeys. I will have been successful if we have had four online community groups, four mentoring partners, and if we have Women in Ministry Network coordinators at four of our major colleges.

Goal 3: To provide opportunities for women in Churches of Christ to participate in training and equipping for leadership. I will set out to achieve this goal using the following strategies:

Strategy 1: In March of 2017 I will lead a retreat for the women of the Manhattan Church of Christ. We will use the material I've developed about the relationship between voice, testimony, spiritual storytelling and leadership. This will be an opportunity for me to use this material with a group of laywomen. This type of retreat can be duplicated in many different places with smaller or larger groups, with the goal of equipping lay women for authentic spiritual leadership.

Strategy 2: In the summer of 2017 I will lead the Women in Ministry Network conference. I will expand the scope of the conference by inviting both clergy (including seminary students) as well as laywomen who see themselves as leaders in their churches. There will be small groups and breakout sessions so that the participants will have many opportunities to connect with others with similar roles, interests, and life situations. I will include some sessions in the conference focused on equipping women for leadership.

Evaluation of Goal 3: The success of this goal will be measured by the response to these two events. Both of these events should serve as prototypes to be duplicated at other times and places. More leadership retreats will be planned for women around the country, and the expanded Women in Ministry Network will secure the funding so that we are able to meet for a conference every summer. I will have been successful if 40 women participate in the Manhattan Church of Christ retreat, with plans to repeat the retreat for 2 more churches. The Women in Ministry Network conference will be a success if we have 80 people in attendance, with at least 50% clergy.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Biblical/Theological

In their book *Saved from Silence*, Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson explain the significance of voice as a theological metaphor. “Voice is about recognizing and valuing the existence of the other, calling forth the other into a response of conversation, and claiming the priority of mutuality over the static separation of silence.”²⁷ I will look specifically at the development of voice in Luke and Acts, following this theme with an eye toward developing a theology of voice for the church today.

Psycho/Social

My second research area has to do with the importance of finding and developing ones own voice in a religious context. As Turner and Hudson have explained, “The use of the metaphor ‘voice’ to represent the authoritative or valued self suggests that the voiced woman is one who recognizes her own value and thus accords herself the right to speak. Other people may feel authorized by a community that values their voices and listens to them.”²⁸ I want to look at both sides of this equation. How does a woman find her voice in a conservative²⁹

²⁸ Mary Lin Hudson and Mary Donovan Turner, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 49.

²⁹ I use the terms *conservative* and *progressive* with apologies. I fully acknowledge that labels do not adequately represent the multifaceted dynamics and opinions at place in any one congregation or community of people. However I have been unable to find a way to discuss these complicated situations without using such generalizations.

Christian context, and why is it important for the Christian community to hear the voices of women?

I would like to explore the traditional practice of testimony³⁰ and the art of spiritual storytelling³¹ in the life of an individual and congregation. I'd also like to look at the research on spiritual growth³² and faith development,³³ specifically the work of James K. Fowler, to discover the role of voice in faith development. Ultimately my goal will be to articulate a practical theological view of the connection between the development of voice, self and faith.

Educational

In my third research area I will look at theories of learning to understand how the development of voice is understood in a secular educational context. Teachers are continually faced with the challenge of helping their students to find their voice as writers. I will be able to study cutting edge educational theory and apply that information to women finding their voices in changing churches. This research is important for my purposes because most of the spoken words in a worship service are actually written words and women need to learn to find their

³⁰ Anna Carter. Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

³¹ Richard Peace, *Spiritual Autobiography: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998).

³² Walter Brueggemann and Elizabeth McWhorter, *Belonging and Growing in the Christian Community* (Atlanta: Christian Education, 1979).

³³ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

voices as writers so that they are able to write the words they will eventually speak from the pulpit.

CHAPTER 5 MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

Competencies Chosen for Development

I. As a Preacher and Interpreter of Sacred Texts

My religious community places an extremely high importance of the Bible. As historian Doug Foster explains, any lasting change will be rooted in scripture.

“This issue [understanding of women’s roles] will become more important for us as the decade progresses... There is already an extensive probing into this question among us, and none of the assumptions of the past will be exempt from scrutiny. But the discussion in Churches of Christ is and will continue to be rooted in Scripture.”³⁴

If I am going to grow as a teacher or leader in the Churches of Christ I must grow in my competency as a preacher and interpreter of the Bible. My primary task will be to develop a Biblical theology of voice, specifically the voices of women. I’ll need to build a strong Biblical foundation so that my audience can see how the Bible is calling women out of silence into their authentic, courageous voices.

Strategies

- A. I will seek out opportunities to preach and teach over the coming year.
- B. I will enlist the help of a speech coach, and work with this person before my Esther sermon in May.
- C. I will audit Dr. Reisig’s class about online Greek resources in January.
- D. I will meet with my orthodox Jewish friend Melanie Fagelson-Levy to learn more about a Jewish view of the book of Esther.

³⁴ Douglas A. Foster, *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken?: Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1994), 111.

- E. I will audit Dr. Moody-Shepherd's class on Women in the Second Testament in the late spring.
- F. I will read N.T. Wright's new book *The Day the Revolution Began* in an effort to reimagine a theology of the crucifixion and how it informs our faith and practice today.

Evaluation

I will assess my success in increasing my competency as a preacher and interpreter of sacred texts through a self-evaluation when the items listed are complete. I will also ask 4 people for feedback about each sermon.

II. As a Leader

In this demonstration project I will be need to lean into my role as a leader in the Churches of Christ, as well as in the larger community. I'll need to continue to learn how leaders emerge in the midst of organizational change, and how I can provide leadership given my unique pastoral position. Our denomination needs strong leaders to step forward and empower others to make important changes. Ultimately my goal is to help other women grow into leaders in Churches of Christ, thus my own leadership abilities will be extremely important.³⁵

Strategies

- A. I will meet with Martha Spong who leads a very large support group for women clergy.
- B. I will meet with Dr. Moody-Shepherd to discuss being a leader as a woman in the church.

³⁵ Hallee Gray Scott, *Dare Mighty Things: Mapping the Challenges of Leadership for Christian Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 31.

C. I will seek out an appropriate leadership training course, retreat, or other resource, and make plans to participate in it.

D. I will do some research on the particular leadership challenges for women, and learn from the wisdom of women who have done this before me.

Evaluation

I will assess my success in increasing my competency as a leader through a self-evaluation when the items listed are complete. I will also ask 4 people for feedback about my growth as a leader.

III. As a Prophetic Agent

In this project I will be challenged to grow as a *prophetic agent* because I will be calling people to step out of their previously held traditional roles into new roles. I will be challenging them to listen to God's call and step out in faith in ways that are new, uncomfortable and even difficult. And I will be helping them to see the mission of God at work in the world and in their lives, and to understand how through their actions and choices they can participate in God's mission in the world.³⁶

Strategies

A. I will go on the NYTS Going Home trip, April 16-24, 2017.

a. Through this experience I will learn important things about the history of our country, of the church in the United States, and about complicated racial, social, theological, psychological matters that continue to be present in our world today.

³⁶ Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 57.

- b. Through this experience I will grow in my courage to move in spaces that are difficult and uncomfortable, and in my conviction to act courageously in spite of my fears.
 - c. Through this experience I will grow in my friendship with people who are different than I am in significant ways – race, class, family structure, life experience – and through these friendships my vision will be increased and I will become more comfortable with a wider variety of experiences, lifestyles and worldviews.
 - d. Through this experience I will increase my listening skills and learn to participate more productively in difficult conversations.
- B. I will keep a journal to record my experiences and reflections.

Evaluation

I will assess my success in increasing my competency as a prophetic agent through a self-evaluation when the items listed are complete. I will write a reflection looking at myself as a prophetic agent in light of what I learned through the Going Home experience. I will be able to identify 8 key events that helped to me understand my roles as a prophetic agent. I will have written a journal entry for every day of the trip.

Site Team Recommendations

The members of the Site Team were given a copy of the Ministerial Competencies and they assisted me in a detailed analysis of the competencies based on their knowledge of my talents, skills, gifts and abilities and the demonstration proposed. The Site Team Members involved in evaluating my ministerial competencies were Dr.

Matthew E. Vaughan, Allison Isbell, Janet Lim and Christine Garrison. All four are members of the Manhattan Church of Christ and have known me in a pastoral context for a many years.

While we agreed that all of the competencies are worthy of consideration and important for my continued growth, three were chosen for me to focus on. The team put together a detailed report in which they commented in great detail on the components of the three selected competencies. I will refer to this helpful material as I go forward in developing my demonstration project. The following are their summary statements:

Preacher/Interpreter of Sacred Texts

SENSITIVITY – The committee chose the word “sensitivity” because of her particular role with the women within Churches of Christ. Amy is an incredibly important figure for women in our tradition – given how relatively rare female preaching still is. Amy’s work in the Women in Ministry Network (a support group for women in ministry within Churches of Christ) is just one example of the work she does in this area. We hope that she will continue that valuable work.

Prophetic Agent

We have named this as an area that we hope Amy will continue to work within. But our focus in answering this question is exclusively her role with women in ministry within Churches of Christ. Her presence at Manhattan Church of Christ, and at other denominationally- affiliated events, is to us indicative of her commitment to transform our fellowship into one that is more accepting and affirming of women in ministry. We could not be more supportive. We see Amy’s Women in Ministry Network as a clear example of this competency coming through in her ministry. She has an innate ability to

draw others to her in the work she does – which is one of her strongest competencies at Manhattan Church of Christ. We therefore hope that she will continue the fine and important work she does with that Network, inspiring a new generation of women to hold important leadership positions in our tradition. It is a genuine point of pride for the congregation to be a part of that ministry.

Leader

VALIDATING – We feel like Amy is particularly good at *validating* the daily challenges of members in our congregation – and those who listen to her preach in other settings. There is a sense in her words of “living alongside” us in our walk through life, and we feel like this is a particularly valuable aspect to her ministry.

CHAPTER 6 EVALUATION PROCESS

The Evaluation Process needs to identify clearly three aspects::

1. The method of evaluation, such as survey, in-depth interviews, observation, or spiritual assessment tool.
2. The agent performing the evaluation, such as the candidate, the site team, or an other designated observer.
3. The criterion for the evaluation. For instance: “Over two-thirds of the participants will be able to demonstrate a significant degree of....”

Method of Evaluation 1: Participant Feedback

After each event I will ask participants to give feedback. Their feedback will be used in planning the next steps and future events. Over two-thirds of the participants will be able to demonstrate an increased understanding of the importance of finding their spiritual voice, as well as the importance of learning and telling their spiritual story.

Method of Evaluation 2: In Depth Interviews

I will select 8 people with whom to conduct in depth interviews regarding their experience with my demonstration project. From these interviews I will learn what was effective and what changes should be made for future projects. I will listen for increases in theological and vocational clarity, as well as an increase in resources for emotional and spiritual support. All of these people will be able to articulate how the project has helped them to find clarity, hope and courage.

Method of Evaluation 3: Follow-up Questionnaire

When I send out my initial questionnaires I will ask for contact information and permission to send follow-up questionnaires. In the follow-up questionnaires I will ask if women feel more supported in the non-traditional roles they are being invited to take on. Over half of the participants will know about what the Women in Ministry Network has

to offer, will have visited the website, and will have plans to participate in one way or another.

APPENDIX 1 TIMELINE

November	Submit proposal Begin research question 1 Write fundraising letters for WIM
December	Design and distribute questionnaires Research question 1
January	Complete research question 1 Begin research question 2 Gather completed questionnaires First WIM community-building Pilot program Follow up on fundraising leads
February	Research question 2 Plan Manhattan Church of Christ women's retreat Design and begin initial promotion of WIM summer event Begin work on WIM reorganization and website
March	Manhattan Church of Christ Women's retreat Research and write Esther sermon Complete research question 2
April	Complete new WIM website Promote and begin registration for WIM summer event Begin research question 3 Finalize Esther sermon
May	Deliver Esther sermon at Pepperdine Bible Lectures Complete research question 3 Plan and organized WIM summer gathering
June	Present paper at Christian Scholars Conference Finalize plans for WIM summer gathering
July	WIM summer gathering (exact dates TBD)
August	Follow-up questionnaires Write project evaluation
September	Write dissertation

APENDIX 2 BUDGET

Personal

Travel	\$800
WIM website design	\$400
Books	\$500

Fundraising Goals

WIM annual event	\$15,000
Scholarships and travel stipends from WIM members	\$15,000

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Appendix B

History of the Community of Women Ministers

Notes from D'Esta Love:

1997--Sheila Bost and I planned an informal gathering of women in ministry at the Pepperdine Lectureships. We filled our room and asked everyone to stand and tell us about their ministry.

1998. We repeated the same informal gathering and had a large crowd. The response from those in attendance was not as meaningful as the first.

1999. I changed the format and had four speakers tell us about their ministries: Amy Bost, Shelley Neilson, Billie Silvey, and a student (I have forgotten her name)

1999--A few of us met at the Lectures in my office area and Amy Bost suggested creating a list serve of women in ministry.

2000--I was appointed to the Pepperdine Vocation Grant steering committee and recommended we include funding for women in ministry.

2001--Our list serve became more formally a network for women in ministry

Annual Meetings:

- 2005 Pepperdine University Conference
- 2006 Rochester College Conference
- 2007 Dallas (sponsored by Abilene Christian University)
- 2008 NYC Conference
- 2009 Pepperdine University Conference
- 2010 Regional Gatherings
- 2011 Regional Gatherings
- 2012 Kansas City Conference
- 2013 Organizing committee meeting at Pepperdine University
- 2014 Lipscomb University Conference
- 2015 Abilene Christian University Conference
- 2016 CWM group attended Streaming at Rochester College
- 2017 NYC Conference

Appendix C
Gender and the Bible: Recommended Reading

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Appendix D Esther Sermon

Esther Sermon
Pepperdine Bible Lectures, May 5, 2017

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, there was a peasant girl who dreamed of being queen. One day a letter arrived at her home. The prince was looking for a bride! All eligible women of the kingdom were invited to attend the ball and meet the king. The girl wanted more than anything to go to the ball but she had no way to get there and nothing to wear. But fortune was on her side. To everyone's surprise the girl arrived at the ball just in time! Across the crowded room the prince saw her and knew she was the one he wanted, for he had never seen anyone as beautiful as she.

We all love a fairytale, don't we? And in a world of Disney Princesses we know exactly how the story is supposed to go. So here, right smack in the middle of our Bibles we find our very own princess tale.

The only problem, of course, is that the story of Esther is not a children's story, in fact it is not a fairy tale at all.

In the first chapter of Esther we meet an unstable king, intoxicated by his own wealth and drunk on his own power.

You see, King Xerxes of Persia knew how to party. He spent months on end entertaining guests and impressing them with his beautiful home, his amazing food and his abundance of wine. Our story begins in just such a party. For six months Xerxes has been entertaining the men with lavish hospitality. While they have seen the golden goblets and the linen curtains and the marble pillars, they have not yet seen the king's prized possession.

Vashti, his beautiful queen, has been busy entertaining the women of the kingdom at her own banquet. The king sends word to her requesting that she appear before his guests wearing her royal crown. To his surprise and horror, Vashti refuses to leave her own banquet and parade before his gathering of drunk men. Mortified, Xerxes decides he has to get rid of Vashti and find himself a new, young, beautiful queen who will surely be more cooperative.

He comes up with a plan: He will have a contest! Girls will come from all over the kingdom and compete to become queen. From all of the contestants, he will choose his very favorite and she will win the crown.

This is not a fairy tale at all, but it does sound a little like an ancient, royal version of "The Bachelor," doesn't it?

One man. Many women.

The women all competing with each other for the man's affections.

The women spending lots of time and money making themselves as beautiful as possible. The modern version of this includes tanning lotions and skin firming solutions and eye brightening creams and teeth whiteners and a juice cleanse. The ancient contestants also were given special food and twelve months of beauty treatments before they met the king.

Now in the modern version of "The Bachelor," the man takes each woman on a series of dates, some more exotic than others, and when things get hot and heavy the viewers are left wondering what might be happening behind the closed doors of the "fantasy suite."

Xerxes, on the other hand, did not go on dates with the girls. Rather his reality show consisted only of a fantasy suite. One night in the fantasy suite with each girl, until he chose the one he liked the most.

So there are some similarities, but there are some critical differences between "The Bachelor" and the story of Esther. Take a look at Esther chapter 2.

At the beginning of the chapter we are introduced to Esther – a young Jewish woman with a painful history. She had lost both her father and her mother, and been adopted by her cousin Mordecai. Her ancestors had been forcefully taken from their homes during the Babylonian exile, and Esther and her Jewish community were living as outsiders in the land of Persia.

You'll notice in verse 6, that the narrator repeatedly uses verbs in the passive tense to describe their history:

"Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Kish had been **carried away** from Jerusalem among the captives **carried away** with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had **carried away**."

Esther's ancestors had been forcefully removed from their homes and taken to live in a foreign land.

As the narrator continues, telling us the story of the king's beauty contest, again the passive tense is used (verse 8):

"So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women **were gathered** in the citadel of Susa in custody of Hegai the king's eunuch, Esther also **was taken** into the king's palace."

Don't miss this important point: Just as her people had been taken away from their land, Esther and all of the other teenage girls were gathered, were taken, were carried away from their homes and placed in the custody of Hegei, the king's servant. Esther and the other young women **had not chosen** to be a part of this contest.

They were young, much younger than the king. They had never had any sort of sexual experiences before their night in the "fantasy suite" with King Xerxes.

So rather than reminding us of a silly, romantic reality show, it would be more accurate for us to compare this story to modern sex trafficking. Esther, and all the other girls were gathered, taken and placed in the king's X-rated beauty contest.

And the girls were at the mercy of a ruthless, pagan king, just as the Jewish people were.

It is against this backdrop that we learn about Esther. We know she was beautiful – the narrator tells us that at the very beginning of the story— but her physical beauty is only mentioned one time. There was just something unusual, something special, about this girl.

The king saw it immediately. After his night with Esther, Xerxes shut down the entire contest. The scripture says he "loved her more than all the other women; so he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."

So this is how Esther, a foreign, female, orphan, the ultimate outsider in her society, became the Queen of Persia. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she would end up there. And while she barely recognized herself, living in a palace and dressed in royal robes, she knew for a fact that those around her, including the king, didn't really know her at all. See, her cousin Mordecai had advised her to conceal her Jewish identity, and that is exactly what she did.

A few years into Esther's time as queen, a man named Haman was promoted to the highest position in the kingdom, second only to the king himself.

Like his boss, Haman had an enormous ego and an anger problem.

Whenever he walked by the palace gate, he made everyone kneel before him. But Esther's cousin, Mordecai, refused to bow down before Haman.

This made Haman very angry. So angry in fact that he wanted to kill Mordecai.

However Haman wasn't a fan of small, simple gestures. Killing Mordecai would be too easy for a man of his great power. Thus he decided to kill all of the Jews throughout the land of Xerxes - young and old, men, women and children, were to be annihilated on one specific day.

Haman was just one in a horrifying line of leaders intent on destroying an entire race of people. Just two weeks ago I sat in the sanctuary of the Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. You may remember that this is the church where in 2015 a young man killed 9 people as they were concluding their mid-week Bible study. He was

clear about his motive—he wanted to kill them because of their race. And it was only 78 years ago that Adolph Hitler expressed plans to annihilate the whole Jewish race.

Racial hatred. Ethnic cleansing. Genocide.

Perhaps we now understand why Mordecai advised Esther to conceal her Jewish identity. Perhaps we now understand why the story of Esther has always been so important to the Jewish people.

The threat of anti-Semitism was and still is real and continual.

When the people heard Haman's evil plans, the scripture tells us that the city of Susa was thrown into confusion. But the king and Haman sat down and had a drink.

Desperation, fear, and grief spread across the land as more and more Jews were made aware of Haman's plans for their destruction. But Esther was in the palace, shielded from the chaos and completely unaware of the impending massacre.

Until she received a message from Mordecai with these instructions:

“Explain the situation to Esther and ask her to go to the king and beg for mercy for her people.”

When Esther received the message she replied with these words: “Everyone knows that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited will be put to death unless the king holds out his golden scepter. The king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days. If I go in uninvited, he will have me killed.”

There was not a slight chance that she would be killed. If she approached the king uninvited, there was a very good chance that she would not make it out alive. There was a system, an order, a hierarchy in the palace. As queen it was her job to follow the rules. If she approached the king uninvited, he might think she was a rebellious queen—just like Vashti! It was too risky to get on the bad side of someone as unpredictable and volatile as King Xerxes.

But Mordecai said to Esther.

“Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed.

If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die.

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?”

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

His words rang in her ears.

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

Has she?

Has she come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

No! He doesn't know what he's asking!

Maybe, if this had happened thirty days earlier when she was with the king, but now, it's just too dangerous. What good will she be to anyone if she's dead?

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

On the other hand, what if Mordecai's right?

Chances are really good that her Jewish identity will be revealed one way or another.

There is a very good chance she will die along with her people.

And what if she were the only Jew to escape death?

She's already lost her parents. She would lose Mordecai. She would lose everyone.

Even if she survived this massacre, surely she would lose her will to live.

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

She was an orphan, a foreigner, living in a strange land.

But now she's the queen.

She was the ultimate outsider.

Now she has power and privilege.

She won a beauty contest she never asked to enter.

Now she's being called to risk her life to try to save her people.

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

Is she going to hide in the palace, denying her heritage, while her people are being slaughtered?

Or can she find the courage to risk her life for her people?

Mordecai's challenge to Esther foreshadows the words the Jesus would speak approximately 500 years later: Esther, "whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?"

Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?

Mordecai acts as a prophet, articulating Esther's vocation; invoking God's call on Esther's life.

“Who knows if perhaps you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?”

We've been having some important conversations in our world lately about the concept of privilege. Perhaps you've heard the term “white privilege” or “male privilege.” Privilege is defined as “a special right, advantage, or immunity available only to a particular person or group of people.”

Now Esther, as I've said before, was the ultimate outsider. She was a foreigner, a woman, and an orphan. If anyone in that society was lacking in privilege and power it was Esther.

But God is the master of dramatic reversals and in the mystery of divine providence, Esther becomes a person of unique privilege and power. She is perhaps the only person in all of Persia in the unique position of privilege and power with the potential to change the destiny of the Jewish people. She has the power to save them.

Esther! The Jewish orphan girl has this power!

And so, even though she's afraid, Esther steps forward. And she does exactly what every single one of us should do when we think that God may be calling our name:

She asks the community to stand with her, to listen with her, before the Lord.

“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

Courage doesn't mean denying the danger.
And courage doesn't mean not being afraid.
Courage is doing what you have to do even though you are very afraid.

When Esther says “If I perish, I perish” she is not being cavalier and she's not being fatalistic. She's being brave.

After three days of fasting, Esther gets up and puts on her royal robes. She's still afraid but after three days of waiting on the Lord, she has been given enough faith to courageously step into an unknown future, to step into the power that is uniquely hers and use it in a desperate attempt to save her people.

They say that every journey begins with a single step, and this step, Esther's step out in faith and into the inner court of the king, changed the course of history. To her surprise and great relief, the king extends his scepter and allows her to speak. And over the course of the next few days Esther uses great wit and strategy to reveal both her own Jewish identity as well as Haman's evil plans.

Esther's step out in faith and into the inner court of the king begins a series of dramatic reversals – reversals that turn the entire story upside down.

Rather than enjoying the king's *favor*, Haman becomes the *object* of the king's *wrath*. Rather than *Haman* ruling at the right hand of The king, it is *Mordecai* who is elevated to the highest position in the kingdom.

Rather than *destroying Mordecai* and his people, *Haman becomes the victim* of his own infamous plot.

Rather than being *annihilated*, the Jews are *victorious over their enemies*.

Rather of *huddling together in fear and grief*, the Jewish community in Persia *joins together in joyful celebration*.

Rather than being a timid, compliant girl, afraid to speak up, Esther takes her places as the queen of Persia, authoritatively working to advocate for the welfare of Jewish people.

If we fast forward once again, to the gospel of Luke, we will see another example of a young Jewish woman who understood that the Hebrew God is one who loves to turn history on its head. Listen to the words of Mary's Magnificat, and see if you can almost imagine Esther singing the same song:

"My soul praises the Lord.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

For God took notice of his lowly servant girl,

and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

God has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

God has brought down princes from their thrones

and exalted the humble.

God has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away with empty hands.

God has helped Israel

and remembered to be merciful.

God made this promise to our ancestors,

to Abraham and his children forever."

The great irony of the book of Esther, however, is that the name of God is never mentioned. Indeed there are very few details about Esther's Jewish religion, and nothing about God or faith. Yet as we read the story through the lens of faith, God's hand is seen at every turn of Esther's story.

It's clear to me that Esther was called by God. That God was the one who brought Esther to this time and place. That God was the one who brought her to the kingdom for such a time as this. Esther was a participant in God's covenant of vocation. Just as you are. Just as I am.

This means that God has called all of us to participate in the work of salvation. We are called—each and every one of us—to the work of the gospel, to partner with God in the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Esther was uniquely situated to do something that no one else could do. She was the only one who could do it! Esther had the privilege. Esther had the position. Esther had the disposition. Esther had the relationship. If anyone was going to have the words and the wisdom to approach this king, Esther was that person.

Esther was called by God. To have faith. And to have courage. To step forward and change the course of history.

And so are you. So am I. God is infinitely creative when it comes to giving human beings the gifts and the wisdom and the connections and the position to be able to do what needs to be done at exactly the right time and place.

Now you may be thinking that we aren't in a place of crisis like Esther was. Her story was so dramatic—you and I aren't in a position to save our people from destruction.

Or are we?

In 2014 suicide was the second leading cause of death in the US among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34.

Are we not in a crisis?

A 2013 report found that "one of every three black American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime."

Are we not in a crisis?

In the world today an estimated 5.5 billion people face some form of religious persecution.

Are we not in a crisis?

167 countries in the world still have some form of modern day slavery, and an estimated 60,000 people are enslaved in the United States.

Are we not in a crisis?

663 million people in the world live without access to clean water.

13 million American children don't know where their next meal is coming from.

And in New York City alone, one in every five pregnancies will end with an abortion, which indicates to me that we as a society are not doing everything we can to meet the needs of women.

So I ask you, are we not in a crisis?

We have more crises than we know what to do with!

It's all hands on deck, folks!

Just as God was calling Esther, God is calling every one of us to do what we can. It doesn't matter who you are—black or white, male or female, young or old—God is calling you! To have the courage to use whatever privilege, whatever power, is yours to step up and step out and do your part in the covenant of vocation that has been given to you by the living God.

The stakes are so high.

We can't waste your time hiding behind conversations about decorum. It was highly inappropriate for Esther to approach the king. But there were lives on the line.

Every rule in the book said that Esther was supposed to be silent. But God was calling her to speak.

And God is calling us to speak. Every one of us.

God is calling all of us to preach the gospel because it is the power of God for the of those who believe.

God is calling us—all of us—to be a part of the work of salvation. Not to waste our time arguing about who is allowed to do what.

N.T. Wright explains that as Christians we are all invited to participate in the covenant of vocation.

We are what the Bible calls “the royal priesthood,” or “the kingdom of priests”—“people who are called to stand at the dangerous but exhilarating point where heaven and earth meet.”

As Esther stood that day appealing to King Xerxes for the future of the Jewish people, her true royal robes were not bestowed on her by the king of Persia, rather she was dressed in divine robes as she appealed to an earthly ruler on behalf of the almighty God. She was acting as a royal priest, participating in the work of salvation.

And so may we, brothers and sisters, open our ears to hear the call of a world in fear, grief, danger, longing to be set free.

May we have the wisdom of Mordecai to understand who God is calling for each specific situation and to empower the people who are uniquely positioned to help.

May we have the courage of Esther to step forward and answer the call of God on our lives, even when we're afraid.

And may we labor together in the work of the gospel, members of the royal priesthood, partners with God in the work of salvation.

Appendix E Charis Posts

The Women's Issue

We often refer to the conversations around women in the church as “the women’s issue.” Churches are studying “the women’s issue.” Churches are dividing over “the women’s issue. Men and women, myself included, have emphasized the importance of “the women’s issue.” But is “the women’s issue” truly a women’s issue? Does it belong to women? Is it about women? What do we mean when we call it “the women’s issue,” and is that an accurate label?

In the Churches of Christ we seek to pattern our communities and worship after the New Testament church. We read the Bible with an eye toward direct commands. It is easier to enforce a command than it is to imitate biblical examples or mine the Scripture for timeless principles. Unfortunately the few New Testament commands regarding women stand in stark contrast to the New Testament’s examples including women and the gospel’s principles that affect women. Churches have followed the few commands that silence women, but ignored the large amount of material that would lead one to believe that God intends for women to have full and complete involvement in every aspect of church life.

When people ask for changes to be made with regard to women in the church, one of the issues at stake has to do with the Bible being taken seriously. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the desire is not that Scripture be ignored or taken less seriously. It is rather that Scripture be read fully and that attention be given not only to direct commands but also to biblical examples and gospel principles. The process should not begin and end with the proof-texting of a few verses. While these discussions may focus on women, one of the main issues at stake is how we read the Bible. This is an issue that is important for the whole church, male and female alike.

The second issue is one of character. A church that discriminates based on physical characteristics is not a community that is shaped by compassion or reconciliation. A church that holds on to a worldly system of power is not following the ways of the kingdom of God, where the first are last and the greatest are servants. Modern Christians are painfully aware of our history. The church has not always stood on the side of justice. Unfortunately the church has been party to devastating harm and has perpetuated injustice in significant ways. Those who are asking churches to examine their restrictions on women are asking that the church renew its commitment to compassion, justice and cruciform leadership. This issue is about much more than women and it affects the whole church.

The third issue at stake is about being open to the Spirit of God. Jesus described true worship as marked by spirit and truth. Any worship gathering that is not open to the Spirit of God is lacking in this distinct characteristic of Christian worship. The church we find in the New Testament was keenly aware of the gifts the Holy Spirit was giving to each member of the church. In fact, Paul compares the church to a body, emphasizing how each member has fully unique yet equally significant functions depending on how that member has been graced by the Spirit of God. The fullness of Christian worship is experienced in the unity of these diverse members, coming together and courageously

offering their gifts in service of the church—each in their own way as God has called and gifted them. So the concern is not for women alone. The desire is to be a community that is welcoming and embracing of the gifts, talents, skills, and interests God has given to each person. This Christian community will reap the spiritual benefits from empowering each and every person to speak words of edification and blessing as they have been called and gifted. The discussion centers on women but the issue is truly about everyone.

One final issue that is at play when women in the church are being discussed has to do with the role of fear in the decisions we make as church leaders and as disciples of Jesus. Is it better to play it safe or is it better to take risks? Often leaders resist changes because they fear the fallout. People might leave the church. People might stop contributing money. People might criticize the leaders and accuse them of having impure motives or making wrong decisions. It is always scary to make changes. What is known always feels safer than the unknown. 1 John 4:18 says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.” Thus the issue at stake is the priority of love over fear. Knowing our fearful ways, Jesus commanded us again and again to not be afraid. The request is that church leaders not resist change because they are afraid, but make courageous decisions out of love. This is a defining characteristic of the Christian faith. It is a core principle that will certainly affect women in the church, but it reaches into every area of Christian discipleship and church life.

It is worth mentioning that we do ourselves no favors when we assign a problem in the church to one gender or the other. The body of Christ is made of many members who are completely dependent on one another. If one part of the body is compromised, the whole body suffers. While men may feel tempted to downplay the importance of discussions about women, they would do well to remember that there has never been a man who has walked the earth nor stood behind a pulpit who does not have a mother. Men also have daughters, sisters, wives, and female friends. The wellbeing of men is inextricably tied to the wellbeing of women. Needless to say, the reverse is true as well. We are all parts of a whole. Our sinful nature is to divide and compete, but the gospel of peace reminds us that we were made to love each other and worship with one voice.

As you can see, “the women’s issue” is not simply about women, for women, or because of women. It has to do with far more than women. Identifying it with a marginalized group functions to diminish its importance and fails to communicate the far reaching implications of the discussion. Likewise, it is not one single issue. This label, while perhaps convenient, tragically simplifies the complex and critical issues at stake. All of these issues are important; in fact, they are central to the faith and the authenticity of the Christian witness.

A Mother Always Worries

I have a daughter. A sweet little daughter with straight blond hair and trusting blue eyes. As excited as I am to watch her grow up, there are a lot of things I worry about.

I worry that she'll listen to criticisms and internalize them; that she'll lose her innocent confidence.

I worry that she'll get mixed up with the wrong people; that people that will hurt her, take advantage of her, and lead her into dangerous situations.

But I don't worry about her wanting to lead a prayer in church. That would be wonderful.

I worry that she'll learn to hate her body. I worry that she'll diet until she's too thin, or make herself throw-up to lose weight.

I worry that she'll be attracted to guys that care more her body more than her soul. Or that she will believe someone when he says that sex is nothing more than a harmless physical experience.

But I don't worry about her wanting to lead singing during a Sunday morning worship service. If that's the girl she grows into, I'll be thrilled. That would be fantastic.

I worry about social media; that she'll post something stupid and hurt someone's feelings, or that her feelings will be hurt by someone else's words. I worry that she'll walk around looking at her phone, staring at a screen and never seeing the sun, or the sky, or me.

I worry that she'll mistake our parental judgments for unreasonable control; that she'll be angry at us and stop talking to us. I know it will probably happen, but I worry about it all the same.

But I don't worry about her wanting to share her testimony on "Youth Sunday." In fact I pray that she has a testimony she is dying to share. That would be beautiful.

I don't worry about her growing into a woman that is called to Christian leadership. I pray for that. I pray that God will give her a strong faith and a desire to use it in service to the church and the world. I pray that she will know that she is God's woman, called and responsible to use her gifts in God's service.

I do worry that someone will tell her that she can't lead singing, or lead a prayer, or share a testimony. I do worry that someone, somewhere, will gently explain to her that she can't be a Christian leader because she's a girl. That would be tragic.

Before the Throne of God Above

Lisa has two young children. She is married to a kind man who works hard to care for his family, but he does not share Lisa's Christian faith. Every Sunday morning Lisa takes her children to church while Jim enjoys a relaxing morning on the golf course. Lisa has made peace with this situation. She loves Jim and feels blessed to have him as her husband. But she has come to realize that she is the spiritual leader in her family. Jim knows this too. In fact, he finds comfort in Lisa's faith. He does not have a faith that he can claim as his own, but he appreciates the fact that Lisa has a belief in God that brings her peace, and that she is sharing this with their children.

Last Sunday Lisa sat down in the pew next to me. Her kids were with her and I noticed a piece of paper in her hand. As the service began she explained in a whispered voice that she had been asked to lead the intercessory prayer in this morning's service. Would I take care of her kids when the time came to lead the prayer?

The kids did great, sitting with me, looking at pictures on my iPhone while cheerfully pointing to their mom as she stood behind the pulpit. And Lisa led a beautiful prayer, reading the words she had carefully written the night before. When it was over she came back to the pew where we were sitting and both kids crawled toward her. I smiled and told her it was a beautiful prayer and she let out a sigh of relief. It was at that point I realized that she had been nervous. I hadn't noticed it before. Not nervous about her children following her up to the pulpit or misbehaving, but about speaking the prayer itself. Thus she had taken the time to think about the prayer before the service, written it out, asked a friend to care for her kids, and gathered her courage to approach the pulpit and lay the cares of the community before God Almighty.

She didn't have to do it. She could have said no. She didn't have to be invited to lead the prayer in the first place. Certainly there were many others who could have done it, what with her having the kids, and the husband at home, and all that. But what an opportunity we would have missed. An opportunity for Lisa to grow in her faith and confidence as a spiritual leader; an opportunity for these children to see their mother boldly proclaiming her faith in a God who hears our prayers; and an opportunity for those gathered to see a woman of faith courageously approach the throne of God.

Appendix F The Glass Pulpit

THE GLASS PULPIT: HOW WOMEN NAVIGATE THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN ACADEMY AND CONGREGATION

Amy Bost Henegar
Christian Scholars Conference
June 8, 2017

One of the unique characteristics of the Churches of Christ is the relationship we have to our institutions of higher learning. Since we do not have an overarching organizational structure or denominational hierarchy, our colleges and universities provide a structure that would not otherwise exist. While many people who are members of Church of Christ congregations attend colleges and universities not affiliated with our fellowship, many still do, and our specific form of Christian higher education continues to inform and influence our congregations. Additionally our colleges and universities provide a point of connection, joining our congregations with one another.

A recent informal tally revealed that there are currently more than 300 women studying scripture, ministry and theology at the undergraduate or graduate level in Church of Christ related academic institutions. These women are investing their time and money in preparation for lives of ministry and service to the church. The numerical contrast between women in school and women in congregational ministry is stark. We can count on one hand the number of women who currently hold professional level positions that include preaching and teaching adults in Churches of Christ. There are many more women serving churches as ministers to children, youth or women, but most of those are limited in their roles and do not have the opportunity for professional growth or advancement.

We must face the truth that our colleges and universities are training women to ultimately minister in other places – not as pastors and teachers in congregations of the Churches of Christ. Some are leaving the Churches of Christ to become ordained pastors of other denominations. Some are finding ministry positions in para-church organizations. Some are serving as spiritual directors, or as chaplains in the military, prisons, hospitals and schools. Some are writing and speaking, even cultivating online

“congregations” using the tools of modern technology. Women who train for ministry and graduate from our colleges and universities are serving God in many ways, doing wonderful work with the excellent educations they have received, but they are not preaching in our local congregations. We might hear their voices if we listen carefully and in the right places, but we will not hear their voices in our pulpits.

The conversations, debates, and arguments about gender roles in church certainly range in scope, but much of the focus is on the following passages:

“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” (1 Timothy 2:12, NRSV)

“...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.” (1 Corinthians 14:34, NRSV)

Both of these passages have been thoroughly examined by many scholars and there is an abundance of high quality exegetical analysis and commentary available. We must critically study these passages in order to reach a responsible and faithful conclusion about their meaning and the implications for the modern church.¹ I am fully convinced that Paul was speaking to specific situations within a specific culture and had no intention of these words becoming normative for all time. However, my purpose in this paper is not to exegete these scriptures, but rather to look at how they have affected the relationship between our congregations and our academic institutions with regard to women.

It is important to notice that both of these passages include the word “silent.” Women are told in both places that they are to be *silent* in the church. Not *quiet*. Not *respectful*. Not simply *submissive* or *obedient* or *deferential*. But *silent*. Silent is a strong word. Silent means not singing, not chatting with friends, and not whispering instructions to children. Silence is absolute. I think it is safe to say that the Churches of Christ have not heeded Paul’s literal instructions. Women have always been encouraged to sing, loudly, with joy and energy in worship. Beyond congregational singing, current congregational practices vary widely regarding the ways in which women are permitted to verbally participate in worship.

While our current practices are varied, as are the exegetical convictions regarding these passages, many congregations continue to hold to the idea that Paul’s instructions

are to be taken as normative for faith and practice today. It is practically impossible to enforce a literal silence rule so the silence commands are usually taken to be metaphorical. We understand Paul to be telling women to have a “spirit of silence,” rather than telling them to be literally silent in the churches. This “spirit of silence” requirement manifests itself in all different ways depending on the congregation.

Christian colleges and universities, on the other hand, have not felt obligated to enforce rules of silence for women. We recognize a separation between the academic institution and the church building and we reason that these passages are intended to only silence women in a limited “church” context. This understanding is logistically convenient, for while it is awkward and confusing to attempt to enforce a gender-based silence command in a worship service, it is nearly impossible in a co-ed classroom. More importantly, teachers realize that enforcing a silence command would completely undermine a woman’s spiritual and educational growth and development.

A student’s own voice is a necessary component in the process of spiritual growth and faith development. Spiritual growth begins when a person is willing to listen. But listening is only the first step in learning. In addition to receiving the words of others, the student must reflect on the words she has received and put what she has learned into her own words. The learning cycle is complete when a student can synthesize what she has learned and then teach others. Likewise, the student must listen and respond to the voice of God. Central to our faith is the idea that we can truly hear God’s voice through scripture and the Holy Spirit, and we can respond to God using our own words. In prayer and praise we use our voices, our own words, to respond to the God who continually calls us. It is through this dynamic process of listening and responding to others and to God that we grow as Christians and as ministers.

Consider the research of Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton in their 2005 book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.

Philosophers like Charles Taylor argue that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality. So, for instance, religious faith, practice, and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. Articulacy fosters reality. A major challenge for religious educators of youth, therefore, seems to us to be

fostering articulation, helping teens to practice talking about their faith, providing practice at using vocabularies, grammars, stories, and key messages of faith.²

By addressing their work to those who minister and lead adolescents in church ministries, Smith and Denton underscore the fact that language-based Christian education is not limited to the college classroom. It is exactly what we are called to do in church. Christians are disciples of Jesus. And a disciple is simply one who learns. We learn in classrooms and we learn in worship. It doesn't matter if the building is called a church building or a school or a home. We gather to learn from Jesus and language is central to all learning. Language is central to Christian discipleship.

Our congregations and our college classrooms should both be powerful places of Christian formation where men and women, boys and girls, can come together and learn from Jesus. Jesus, himself gives us a beautiful vision for the church in Matthew 11:26. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." As we gather to worship in a variety of spaces and venues, we open ourselves to engage in the learning process from Jesus, the master teacher. We humbly listen, authentically respond, then rise to teach what we have learned.

The ability to disregard the silence commands has allowed academic institutions to create an environment that is quite different for women than that of the congregation. In many of our academic institutions (certainly not all of them) women experience openness and affirmation regarding their interests, skills and passion for discipleship and ministry. They participate in the same ways and at the same level as their male colleagues. They are invited, in fact they are expected, to speak, pray, share, present, teach, lead and preach in the classroom. But when women leave the academy and attempt to participate in the same way within a congregation, their experience is completely different. They are met with skepticism and sometimes with outright hostility. Because of their gender they are not allowed to speak, pray, share, present, teach, lead or preach in the congregational setting. If they are ever allowed to do these things it is only after careful consideration and deliberation in which the woman is the object of scrutiny, with church leaders examining the appropriateness of her every word.

After many semesters of studying ministry in our schools, being challenged every day to thoughtfully listen and respond, women graduate and go into ministry in churches where they are told that their very words are suspect. Instead of continuing the dynamic process of listening and responding, women are told to listen but not speak. It is easy to see how this process leaves women completely disoriented, disenchanted and often demoralized. Not only are they limited in their capacity to use the skills they have practiced in school, but something much deeper and more dangerous is taking place.

Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, both seminary homiletics professors, wrote a book in 2014 entitled *Saved From Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching*. The book is a study of women's voices in the church. They look at the theme of voice in a literal way, examining the ways in which women's physical voices are heard in scripture and in churches. But they also look at the metaphorical power of voice. They explain that, as a metaphor, voice represents a woman's ability to express herself and make a difference in the world. The physical voice and the metaphorical voice are intricately intertwined. When a woman is not allowed to speak in an audible, physical voice, her ability to use her metaphorical voice is greatly compromised.

To remain silent is to fail to acknowledge our value as human beings made in the "sound" of God. To remain silent is to prevent ourselves from being "known" and, therefore, being part of the life-giving conversation with others. To remain silent is to deny the continuing creativity of God to draw "new worlds" into the present and future moments.³

When Christian teachers invite students to use their voices they are challenging them to fully engage their whole selves in the process of learning and formation that is God's desire for every person. God has given us all brains and hearts and voices to receive the message. And like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our hearts burn within us as the truth of the resurrection is revealed to us. We are moved to a response of praise, testimony and evangelism. We join in a verbal response, like the one described in 1 John 1:1: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." Like Peter and John in Acts 4 we say, "It's up to you to

determine whether it's right before God to obey you rather than God. As for us, *we can't stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.*" (Acts 4:19-20)

Consider the examples of Christian discipleship in the woman of John 4 who told everyone she could find about Jesus; or the man of Mark 1 who was healed of his leprosy and couldn't keep quiet; or the apostle Paul who, after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, immediately "began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'" Christian discipleship is intricately tied to speech. The great commission itself is about words. Jesus told his followers, and all of us who follow him today, to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15) Given how central our own voices are to Christian discipleship, it is not at all surprising that women who have studied ministry in an encouraging and affirming Church of Christ college or university are leaving our tradition to worship and minister elsewhere. Consider the following words shared with me by Church of Christ women, as they reflect on their own experiences:⁴

"In the academic world I am called on by professors, asked to lead, expected to handle material at a seminary level, and my gender is a non-issue. In the church, this same knowledge and leadership is a burden, hidden by leadership, the culprit that 'was splitting the church,' and was consistently usurped by my gender."

"Upon entering my undergraduate degree I remember there being discussion about whether I could read scripture and pray at chapel when I was speaking. However, those discussions quickly resolved themselves to full inclusion during my time as an undergraduate. As a graduate student I was afforded opportunity to write liturgy, to speak in chapels, to pray, to serve and lead and my opinion was valued as highly as any male student.... We then moved to a small rural church where my husband preaches and I run the children's ministry silently. This has been a huge contrast to my academic experience."

"My school environment was open, supportive, and accepting. Church has been suspicious, angry, and doubtful of any female calling."

"I find that in classrooms, I am mostly heard, and there is less of a tight-fisted hold on the idea of male spiritual leadership than there is in a church setting."

“In one environment I was being encouraged, while in the other I was being silenced or reprimanded. In grad school I was encouraged to speak and preach, but in my first ministry job I was not allowed to speak publicly. I was even called in once for praying with a male student.”

“When I left academia, having completed a degree, I couldn’t find any jobs in congregational ministry. So, I worked odd jobs for 15 years while my husband was employed by churches who were all too happy to get my ministry expertise as volunteer hours. Finally, I began my own ministry as a non-profit organization.”

“I felt like my education might be a waste. What I learned was not welcome information in the church, and certainly not from a woman. I felt alive at seminary and dead at church.”

Some women have found a way to minister within our tradition by pursuing a profession in a Church of Christ affiliated academic institution. While these women benefit from the openness of the academic environment, they continue to experience disorientation as they navigate between the two spheres. Consider the following comments:

“One of the reasons I focus in my life on academia is because I feel more welcome there. I am not ignored or sneered at and there are people who would not hear me in a pulpit who hear me in a classroom. Sometimes it feels a bit odd to be permitted to have a voice and opinions with my colleagues five days out of seven, and to be shushed or simply downplayed on Sunday mornings by some of the same people who listened a few days earlier.”

“I have stayed in academia rather than congregations because my short stint in a congregation was highly controversial and personally painful, while my work at universities has been less controversial.”

“If my current inclusive congregation doesn’t thrive or I move, I know I will not be able to get another position as a Church of Christ preaching minister, so I am considering a Ph.D. or D.Min. That way I can go to work in academia, even though my calling is pastoral ministry.”

“As a professor at a Church of Christ University I could speak freely in any forum about any topic. I always had male students in my classes. I read scripture. I don’t

remember leading prayer but I don't remember being prohibited to lead prayer. At church, traditional restrictions were applied – no reading scripture or praying in public for the bulk of my career.”

“In my life experience, the academic setting has been very open, while church settings have been somewhat restrictive. I have been in the academy since 1987. I have prayed in my classes all along the way; I have only in recent years been asked to pray in church settings.”

The disorientation and pain evident in these words illustrates how the current school-church dichotomy is not sustainable. Women will not continue to experience the freedom of fully participating in the language of God only to be silenced in places of worship. Rather, they will continue to leave our faith tradition in increasing numbers and go to groups that practice a fully gender-inclusive theology. They will continue to follow the commands and examples of the Bible, speaking words of faith, exhortation, admonition, praise and prayer, wherever ears are open and hearts are willing to receive.

Theologically trained Women, and the men and families who love them, will continue to graduate from our academic institutions then leave the Churches of Christ to practice ministry unless congregations take the courageous step of recognizing and changing their deeply held beliefs that silence women. Churches must look at the witness of women who served as spiritual leaders for the people of Israel, the counter-cultural way in which Jesus treated women, the lack of gender specifications in Paul's lists of spiritual gifts, the many women who served as leaders in the early church, and the Biblical importance of the Holy Spirit, before they allow two obscure verses to determine their attitude toward half of the human race. Some congregations are doing this and their efforts are being noticed and appreciated. Consider the following quote from a woman whose experience was markedly different from the others:

“I attended a pretty conservative Church of Christ college. I was not allowed to lead singing, pray, read scripture, or speak in chapel. In Bible classes, I felt like my voice was less valued and not taken as seriously as the males in the room. While I was there I attended the most progressive church in the town but my experience at both places was similar. However, after college I was lucky enough to land at a church that was gender inclusive except in the roles of preaching and eldership. There I spoke from the pulpit

during communion and taught adult classes. The senior minister continually challenged me to develop my gifts. The elders actually created my position so that I could use my education and my gifts. I'm so very thankful that he and the elders saw the value of putting me on the ministry staff even in a part-time capacity. "

God spoke a word and created the world. God became human in Jesus who was called "the word." Martha's life was transformed when she spoke the words "I believe." The Holy Spirit came over the believers at Pentecost and empowered them to speak. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem his disciples lined the streets shouting praises to God in loud voices, and when the Pharisees ordered them to stop Jesus answered with these words. "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." It is this same Jesus who calls us today, male and female alike, to bold, courageous, speech.

¹ A good place to start the work of Dr. Thomas Robinson, A Community Without Barriers Study Guide which can be accessed at www.communitywithoutbarriers.com. Also Women, Authority & the Bible by Alvera Mickelsen and The Blue Parakeet by Scot McKnight.

² Smith, Christian; Denton, Melina Lundquist (2005-01-25). Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (Kindle Locations 5826-5830). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Turner, Mary Donovan; Hudson, Mary Lin (2014-10-31). Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching (Kindle Locations 1167-1170). Lucas Park Books. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Experiences were shared with me in response to an emailed questionnaire. While the surveys were not anonymous, their quotes are listed without attribution to protect the identities of those who participated. All quotes are included with permission.

Appendix G
CWM Facebook Group Update

October 12, 2017

I'd appreciate if you all could give me a little of your time to think about the future direction of this group and Church of Christ women in ministry. This is a long post so give me whatever time you've got! I'd love to hear your thoughts, comments, suggestions, ideas, etc. You can post here or you can email me amyebh@gmail.com

Thank you!!!

1) My ministry focus for my DMin is Church of Christ women who have come to, or are in the process of coming to, some sort of feminist awareness. As you and I know from experience (wherever you are in this journey) this is a difficult process to navigate. There are no easy answers, solutions or next steps. However, the process is easier—much easier!—if you have friends who are on a similar journey. That is the number one reason the Community of Women Ministers exists. We all need friends who are attempting to do what we're attempting to do.

2) An online community is great. I'm a big fan of social media and I really love the community a good Facebook group can foster. But online relationships are limited! We all need relationships anchored in flesh and blood—we need to see facial expressions and hear voices and laugh together! Thus we need to find ways to be together in person in addition to hanging out with each other on Facebook.

3) Also, there are plenty of women who aren't on Facebook who need this type of community. Technology and social media continue to change rapidly and for the moment Facebook may be the best space for online community, but there are people who have either made a conscious decision to not be on Facebook, or are just not all that technologically savvy, for whom a Facebook community is really not an option. It's just an issue to keep in mind and I'd love suggestions if anyone has them. I think it's a good idea to keep an ongoing email list to use for announcements in addition to the Facebook page.

4) This group—The Community of Women Ministers (previously the Women in Ministry Network)—is for Church of Christ women who are attempting to find vocational roles in ministry. Those are the parameters but they are defined very broadly.

So who is a Church of Christ woman? You tell me! Someone who goes to a CofC? Yes. Someone who grew up in the CofC? Yes. Someone who studied ministry in a CofC college and has strong connections to the CofC through the professors and friends she made there? Yes. Someone who married into the CofC? Yes. Someone who is from the CofC but has given up on finding a place to do ministry in the CofC and is now worshipping and working in another denomination? Absolutely yes.

And what does it mean to be in vocational ministry? Again, you tell me! The list is quite broad. We have all types of congregational ministers, also chaplains, women who serve in parachurch organizations, writers, missionaries (close and far away), women teaching Bible, theology, ministry etc. on any level—young children through college/graduate/adult students, women who are working in other jobs and pursuing ministry in their free time, women who used to be in ministry and are doing something else for a season. Etc., etc., etc.

Most of us have some theological education. That is a pretty strong point of connection for the women in this group. We have invested ourselves in our area of ministry by pursuing education. The type of education we've done used to be completely closed to women. It is open now but the path forward from that education is still unclear.

5) For as long as I've been one of the organizers/leaders of this group I have heard women voice the concern they may not be in the target audience of this the group. The reasons are quite varied but usually they fall into one of two categories—"I'm not really a minister" or "I'm not really CofC." So I'm here today to say that if you are pursuing vocational ministry in ANY WAY and you feel that you have some sort of strong ties to the Churches of Christ, we want you to be in this group so that we can know you!

6) There are literally hundreds of Church of Christ women who are currently in school hoping to "go into ministry" when they graduate. These girls need women they can talk to who have attempted to navigate this path. They need to talk to women who have stayed in the CofC and women who have left, and women who are working for churches and women who are volunteering and women who have started their own independent ministries, and women who have gone into chaplaincy and women who have gone into academia. All of these voices and examples are needed. Not that any of us have it figured out! But we can share our stories and our journeys and accompany each other on this windy path.

7) So, we need lots of different ways to get together in person and online. The Facebook group is one conversation space. Our annual conference (June, 2018 at Pepperdine) is another. We also need to get in the practice of hosting a dessert or coffee or luncheon or something for women ministers at as many lectureships or conferences as possible. We need to take advantage of any opportunity for online relationships to turn into physical relationships! And this is also a way to welcome new women who may be dying for a friend but don't know this group exists.

8) In order to facilitate this, I'm looking for people to take on leadership roles within this group. We are not a highly structured organization and we're not planning to become one. But we need to spread out the leadership so that we can do more and be available to more women. I have lots of ideas for simple leadership roles, but I'm going to save that for the next post. But be thinking about anything you might like to do to help support CofC women ministers. I'll be back soon with my ideas!

Appendix H
Companions on the Journey Project

Welcome to the Community for Women Ministers COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY project -- helping women to pair up, share the journey and support each other.

The goal is for each pair to speak on the phone for about 30 minutes at least once every two weeks during the months of May, June and July 2017. Please fill out the form below and I will contact you with your companion information.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or special requests.

Many blessings on this journey,
Amy

amy@manhattanchurch.org

Hello! I have paired the two of you up for the Community of Women Ministers *Companions on the Journey* Project.

This is what you should do next:

- 1) Have a brief email conversation -- introduce yourself, exchange phone numbers, and decide when you would like to talk.
- 2) My recommendation is that you aim for 30 minutes every two weeks. You can email or text in between conversations.
- 3) If possible, go ahead and get the first two or three phone conversations on your calendars now. Guard the time and if either person has to make a change try to be accommodating and find another time that works for both people.
- 4) Think about what you'd like to discuss -- ministry situations, vocational issues, theological questions -- as you go through your week make a note of the things you'd like to discuss. If it helps to send an email when you think of something go ahead and do that, that way when you speak on the phone you won't need to share as many background details.
- 5) Pray -- either together on the phone or for each other off of the phone. Share prayer requests.

This is an experiment -- see where it goes! I believe that the Holy Spirit brings people together in ways we could never orchestrate. Ask God to show you why God has put this person in your life at this time.

This session will last from May to July. At the end of July have a final conversation. End the structured relationship and look forward to a continued friendship.

"The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are." C.S. Lewis

Appendix I Support Women Ministers Appeal

April 11, 2017

Dear friends,

I'm writing to you in a regard to a ministry project that has been on my heart for many years. As you may be aware, more and more women from the Churches of Christ are choosing to pursue vocational ministry. There are currently over 300 women studying ministry or theology at Church of Christ colleges and universities. And the Community for Women ministers, which I and others have organized for over fifteen years, has grown to nearly 200 members – all women who are theologically educated and either working in ministry or seeking to find work as a ministers. The numbers are exciting. God is calling women from our faith tradition to articulate the gospel to the church and to the world, and women are answering this call.

The decision for a woman in the Churches of Christ to invest herself in professional ministry is risky. Women step out in faith not having any guarantees that there will be job opportunities waiting for them at the end of the road. As such, they are by necessity quite creative – looking for jobs as hospital chaplains, and teachers in religious schools, and ministry positions in non-profit organizations. Most of these women who came to faith in the Churches of Christ would like to find a way to minister within that tradition, but the jobs for women ministers in churches are still few and far between.

The lure of ordination in another denomination is quite strong. They realize that the grass isn't always greener on the other side of the fence, but there is something very appealing about moving to a tradition that fully endorses women as preachers and church leaders. But many women are resisting the desire to jump ship, wanting to stay the course and work in the faith community they know and love.

Being a woman minister in a Church of Christ context can be a lonely road. In most instances, the woman minister is the lone female on a leadership team of male ministers, elders and deacons. Additionally, most of their churches are studying "the role of women," thus female ministers feel that they are being examined and are somehow carrying the torch for their entire gender. They are tired of being the subject of church conflicts. Many of these women are also mothers and wives, trying to navigate the complicated path of career and family. Female colleagues and role models are few and far between. The result is that women who choose to be ministers within the Churches of Christ desperately need support and encouragement.

For over 15 years the Community of Women Ministers (previously the Women in Ministry Network) has functioned as a group to support women pursuing vocational ministry in Churches of Christ. We have an active Facebook group that provides vital ongoing support, spanning the miles that separate us. And while this is powerful and necessary, there is also a deep need for the women to come together physically so that relationships can be anchored in flesh and blood interactions with human beings who have facial expressions and voices and audible laughs. It is for this reason that we have attempted to meet annually for a retreat or conference.

Our annual gatherings have been quite meaningful but not well attended. There are, unfortunately, many obstacles that keep the majority of women ministers from attending. As one would expect, the obstacles generally fall into the categories of time and money, and while most of the women would readily rearrange their busy schedules in order to attend, finances are the deal breaker.

Which is why I am writing this letter to you! I am making an appeal to people from the Churches of Christ who would like to support women ministers in our fellowship. We need financial contributions so that we will be able to produce a robust and powerful annual conference so that women will leave intellectually edified and spiritually excited to return to their churches and places of ministry. We need financial contributions so that we can offer travel scholarships so that women will be able to attend our conferences. We need financial contributions so that our conferences can be times of nurture with good food and warm hospitality so that women ministers can feel loved, cared for and appreciated.

Your support is a simple gesture that will yield large results. The annual gathering combined with ongoing online support could be just enough to keep many women from isolation and burnout, giving them the encouragement they need to stay in ministry and hopefully stay in the Churches of Christ.

Our 2017 conference is scheduled to take place June 26-28 at the Manhattan Church of Christ where I am on the ministry staff. Tax deductible contributions for the Conference for Women Ministers can be made to Manhattan Church of Christ. We have a wonderful conference planned and donations have been secured to cover the basics. However, many women have already contacted me asking about travel scholarships and I would love to be able to offer as many of those as possible. And I would love to be able to offer not just a high quality conference, but something that feels just a bit luxurious – a special meal, flower arrangements and bottles of water!

Mailing address:

Manhattan Church of Christ, Attn: Amy Bost Henegar
48 East 80th Street
New York, NY 10075

PayPal link: [PayPal. Me/ManhattanCofC](https://www.paypal.com/paytoemail?email=amy@manhattanchurch.org)

Thank you sincerely for your time.

Please consider supporting this important effort. Money is needed as soon as possible to fund the conference in June, but it will also be needed annually so that we can provide ongoing support. Please don't hesitate to contact me with questions, and prayerfully consider others who may be interested in helping. You can reach me through email at

amy@manhattanchurch.org or call my cell phone 646.319.9426.



Amy Bost Henegar, M.Div.

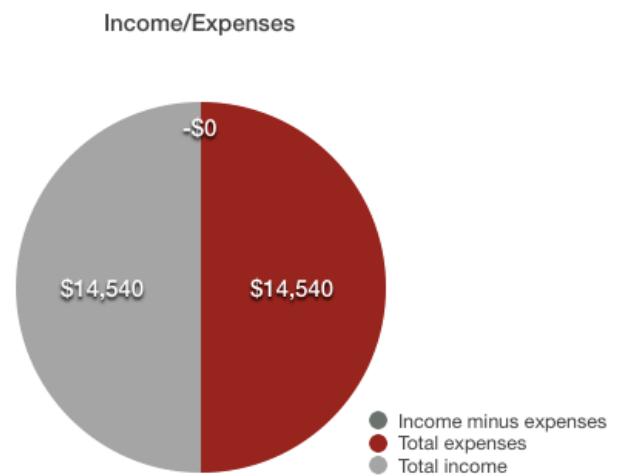
Appendix J 2017 Conference Finances

CWM 2017 Finances

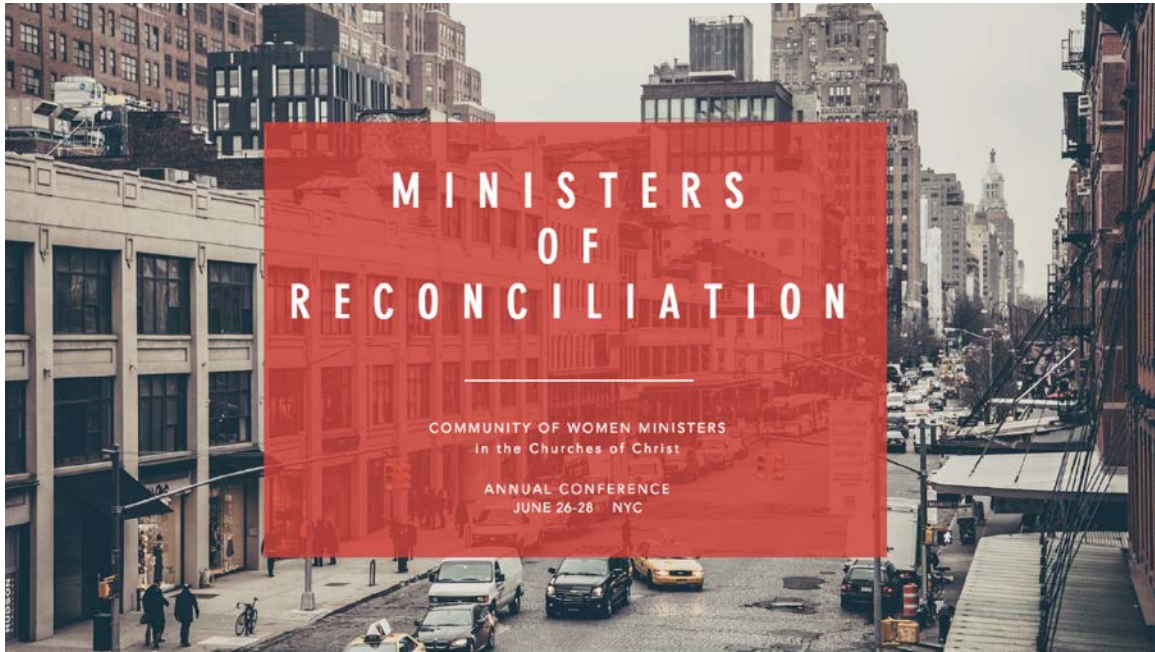
Money In	
Donations	\$8,700
registration fees	\$3,030
Manhattan Church of Christ contribution	\$2,810
Total income	\$14,540

Money Left Over	
Income minus expenses	-\$0

Money Out	
speaker travel Don	\$1,952
honorariums	\$2,200
travel scholarship	\$1,485
hotel	\$4,166
Monday dinner	\$678
Tuesday lunch	\$470
Snacks	\$147
Tony's Di Napoli	\$3,442
Total expenses	\$14,540



Appendix K
2017 Conference Schedule



**Conference for Women Ministers
June 26-28**

**Manhattan Church of Christ
48 East 80th Street
New York, NY 10075**

Monday

4pm Eleanor Moody-Shepherd, “Transformation for Reconciliation”
6pm Worship: Irie Session, “The Silence of Freedom” ([coed](#))
7:15pm dinner at MCOC ([coed](#))

Tuesday

10am Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby and Don McLaughlin, “Practical Theology of Reconciliation”
12pm lunch break
2pm Naomi Walters, “Playful Interrogation and Faithful Improvisation: A Preaching Workshop”
3:30pm Maria Endert-Brooks, “Accompanying Women Through Pregnancy and Childbirth”
6pm Worship: Angela Ravin-Anderson, “Streams in the Wastelands” ([coed](#))
7:15pm dinner at a local restaurant ([coed](#))

Wednesday ([coed all day](#))

10am Thomas Robinson, “A Community Without Barriers”
11am Small group discussions
12pm lunch break
2pm Eleanor Moody-Shepherd, “Tools for the Journey”
3pm Blessing and Dismissal

Appendix L

Guidelines for Future CWM Conferences

Thank you for courageously stepping forward in willingness to plan an annual conference for the Community of Women Ministers! Women ministers in the Churches of Christ look forward to these gatherings and rely on them for critical spiritual support. Your faith and hard work will undoubtedly pay when the event arrives and you are able to experience the fruits of your labor. Thank you in advance. We look forward to celebrating with you! In order to create a level of consistency from year to year, and to avoid mistakes we've made in the past, the following are some guidelines to help in your planning. Every conference is beautifully different—different themes, different locations, different personalities! But it is important that we are consistent from year to year in our purpose. Thus, you are fully invited to use your creativity to plan something that is completely unique, while at the same time remembering the important elements that characterize our gatherings.

1. The Community of Women Ministers is made of women with significant ties to the Churches of Christ who are called to ministry. Our purpose is to provide friendship, encouragement and blessing to women who are called to ministry.
2. While much of our interaction takes place online, our annual conferences are vitally important. Women ministers need the opportunity to form friendships that are anchored in flesh and blood interactions with human beings who have facial expressions and voices and audible laughs.
3. It is difficult for women to find the time and funding to attend yet another event. So it is critical that we create a conference that is valuable to them, and worth the expense of time and money. We can do this in the following ways:
 - a. Women are motivated to attend a conference if the theme is compelling and there is an exciting lineup of speakers.
 - b. They are even more motivated by the participation of a well-known speaker or author
 - c. Women are also motivated to come when they are given the opportunity to teach or participate on a panel. The more we can invite members of the CWM to be a part of the program, the more of these women will attend.
4. It is important that a **critical mass of women ministers** attend the conference. If women do sacrifice their time and money to spend a few days with other women ministers from the Churches of Christ, but the conference is mostly women who are lay leaders from local churches, they will not feel that they received what they were promised. *The success of the conference is dependent a critical mass of women ministers attending.*
5. This does not mean that non-ministers are not invited or should not be encouraged to attend. On the contrary, other women can and should be invited, but concerted efforts must be made to involve as many CofC women ministers as possible.

Other women should understand that they are invited as friends and supporters of women ministers in the Churches of Christ, but it's important to highlight that the intended audience is women who are called to professional/pastoral ministry.

6. You are invited to creatively think about how to involve men. Every year there are men who are incredibly supportive of our efforts and would love to be involved. And there are many ways to involve men while still *preserving significant space for women to be together without men present*. Sometimes men are invited to participate in times of worship or in designated meals. Perhaps the sessions of the final day or the evening sessions are open to men. There is flexibility in this area and it can differ from year to year, however the priority of the conference is creating space for women ministers to be together in a safe space.
7. Important Note: Sometimes it is appropriate to invite a man to speak or teach, even if the session is for women only. If a man is the best fit for a topic, there is no reason to not include male teachers, especially if he is someone our women would be excited to hear. This is not without precedent – there are male teachers in all girls schools and female teachers in all boys schools. Please do not feel that all of your speakers must be women.
8. When promoting the conference, please use the following language:
 - a. “Community of Women Ministers”
 - b. “Conference for Women Ministers”
 - c. “Women with significant ties to the Churches of Christ who are called to ministry”
9. As you think about crafting the conference consider the following areas of focus:
 - a. Leadership training and equipping for ministry – women ministers always an opportunity to improve a specific ministry skills (preaching, teaching, planning retreats or leading small groups)
 - b. Theology of biblical egalitarianism – since we are a faith tradition that is in the middle of significant theological transition, women always appreciate another voice helping them explore the scripture in a way that includes and empowers women for ministry.
10. Every annual conference needs a leader and every leader would need a team. The leadership team will craft the theme, invite the speakers, and plan the details of the conference. The conferences must be planned well in advance in order to get on the speakers’ calendars.
11. Fundraising efforts will continue to pay speakers’ honorariums and travel expenses. Extra money will be used to subsidize conference expenses and offer travel scholarships.

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